

しき
Shiki

レジーナブックス
Regina

自称

悪役令嬢^な
婚約者^の
観察記録。2



没落したい残念令嬢…

ALPHA POLIS
アルファポリス

愛されルートに
強制連行!?

策士な王太子様、ゲームシナリオに終止符を打つ!

Observation Record of a Self-proclaimed Villainess' Fiance

– Jishou Akuyaku Reijou na Konyakusha no Kansatsu Kiroku –

- Volume 2 -

**-Author-
Shiki**

**-Illustrator-
八美☆わん**

[Convallaria's Library]

登場人物 紹介

ネルト

セシルの側近候補の一人。研究オタクで、没頭すると寝食を忘れる。

バルド

セシルの側近候補の一人。身体を動かすことが得意で、戦闘に長けている。

チャールズ

セシルの側近候補の一人。フレイボーイに見えるが、実は一途。

クロ

パーティアと契約している闇の精霊。黒狐や幼女メイドに擬態している。

ゼノ

セシルと契約している精霊。普段は侍従としてそばに控えている。

ショーン

セシルの弟で、アルファスタ国の第二王子。

ヒーローニア

男爵令嬢で、パーティア曰く乙女ゲームの「ヒロイン」らしい。自分はセシルの「運命の乙女」だと主張していて――？

クールガン

パーティアの遠縁の青年で、セシルの側近候補の一人。

パーティア

セシルの婚約者。乙女ゲームの「悪役令嬢」を自称している。悪役らしく振る舞おうとするものの、なりきれていない残念な令嬢。

セシル

アルファスタ国の王太子。頭脳明晰でなんでも簡単にできてしまうため退屈していたが、パーティアに出会ってからは彼女のおバカな言動を楽しんでいる。

Chapter 10

Bertia 16 Years Old

It was spring when Bertia enrolled into the upper secondary school, it was my third year in the upper secondary school, and once again, I assumed the position of the president of the student council.

...and Bertia has started to avoid me.

The beginning of it all was when I saw Baroness Heronia said such terrible words towards her during the summer last year.

She has begun to show her anxious expression more often whenever she sees me. Also, even though she has always come crying to me as soon as something troubling her has occurred up until now, recently she doesn't consult anything to me and only shows a restrained expression that looks like she wants to say something.

I have seen her restraining herself more often, something that doesn't suit her at all.

When I thought about the time when she started to avoid me and grew more distant, it was easy to guess that she was being influenced by Baroness Heronia's words, so I was thinking about how I should handle this, but... Due to the excellency of her friends and my close aides, they managed to decrease the contact between Bertia and Baroness Heroina to utmost limits with their own ways while muttering, "We really don't want to see Bertia getting hurt", with their gloomy expressions.

Even so, Bertia's uneasy appearance didn't change.

That is why, I tried to pamper her more during the time when we were together, which was also increased in comparison to how it usually was.

...And thus, as per Bertia's suggestion, we participated in an event linked to the scheduled [School Festival], in which there would be a voting among the students to select the best couple (limited to fiancées only), and claimed the first place.

Since it was a middle school's project, even if I was participating as a partner, I still

wondered about what would happen if I—who was in senior high school—were to participate. But due to Lady Joanna—who just became Shaun’s fiancée shortly after they dated—wished to participate with Shaun, Shaun stipulated a rule as following: [As long as one of them is a middle school student, a couple consisting of a high school student and middle school student can participate either by others’ recommendation or self-recommendation], and once we noticed, Bertia and I participated because we were listed in others’ recommendations.

When we won the prize, Bertia lamented, “Since the ‘Downfall’¹ is waiting next year, I thought that I’d want to create good memories with my friends while it was possible to do so!! This one that left a strong impression of, [Whenever you recall it, it’s a bitter event], but it has changed now!! It’s terrible!!”. Despite that, I still smiled and as part of service to the other students, I hugged her shoulders and kissed her cheek.

It can’t be helped, as enlivening this sort of occasion is the duty of the royalty, right?

Bertia’s body hardened as she turned bright red just like an apple. So I thought, ‘*It can’t be helped*’, and I held her up in my arms as we descended down from the stage. Of course, I’m being gentle, you know?

I thought that by appealing our intimacy to the others in that manner, Bertia would feel relieved a bit. However, her attitude didn’t change.

No. When she entered senior high school, she began to run away from me even more obviously.

Because things have turned like this, there is only one countermeasure that I can take.

“Since you continue to run away from me, then I have no choice but to catch you, right?”

I smiled widely while cornering Bertia to the wall, placing both of my hands on both sides of her head, while tucking one of my legs between her body.

Of course, I chased her who ran with lightning speed the moment she saw me... there is no need to pretend, as I led her to the rear garden where there are no people around, so there is no need to care about the public.

...In addition, since we strayed “inadvertently” during when she ran away along with her maids, there is no one other than Zeno and Kuro around this place, observing our

condition from a spot apart from us.

“A, are you telling me that I have no option to escape?!”

And, “this is the rumored [Kabedon], right?”, while muttering yet another incomprehensible word, she returned to the present condition, with her face getting bright red and her eyes loitering around. After that, I raised Bertia’s face and when she looked back at me with her teary eyes, the corner of my mouth spontaneously elevated.

“It’s in males’ nature to catch the prey who escapes right in front of his eyes, isn’t it?”

“*Prey*, you said, but I am not a fodder!!”

“You look pretty delicious, you know?”

“...I may more or less have meat, but it’s not tasty to eat!! Please don’t eat me!!”

“...That’s the implication you got? How typical of you, Tia. Now that you mention it, even if it’s not for food, there are also wild carnivores who chased after their preys so that they could play around with them, right?”

“Please do not treat people as toys!! Besides, what you’ve been saying is quite savage!!”

...I can still more or less deny that part about being [savage], but wouldn’t it be way too late for her to notice about me [toying around with people]?

Aah, since Bertia is obedient, could it be that she still hasn’t realized about how I always had fun watching her reaction?

She is truly adorable (plus a bit foolish).

“Look, Tia is as adorable as a doll, so I end up wanting to play together with you.”

“Oh my!! That is!! As adorable as a doll, you said!! I, I won’t be deceived with that kind of f, flattery, okay?!”

Despite saying that, Bertia’s face turned red and her expression made it clear that she wasn’t dissatisfied at all.

Despite the fact that she went along with me and was moved by this easy-to-understand flattery while saying she won't be deceived by it, why would she even run away from me?

If there is a reason, then it'd be better for her to tell me quickly so I can make some countermeasure.

Although I have a feeling that the key is her previous talk with Baroness Heronia about [the fated girl]... but somehow, Bertia stubbornly won't tell me anything about that matter alone.

After saying various reasons such as, "I don't want to hurt Cecil-sama," she always runs away.

...and it's not escaping by changing the subject, what I mean here is that she *physically* runs away.

I thought to catch her, but now that I've managed to catch her, she still wouldn't disclose anything, could it be that to this adorable fiancée of mine, I have to be forceful... a little bit coercive so that I could hear about her story. Since it can't be helped, I will just go through with it.

For sure, if only I was a real [villain], then the talk could proceed with ease, right? Since I will be able to choose any possible means besides being a little coercive.

Also, the other person who knows what the story is about would be the one and only character—Baroness Heronia. I have thought to ask about it to her, but... it will certainly bring me more trouble, so I'm putting it as my last resort.

As much as possible, I don't want to become an [acquaintance] of the bad kid who's bullying Bertia.

"But Cecil-sama, a, at last, the compelling force has begun to operate! Destiny has started to move!! There is only one more year at maximum until I experience [The Downfall] and until I have to get down from the stage. I'll have to say my farewell to Cecil-sama. I've decided that it's better for me to distance myself from Cecil-sama in order to serve that role flawlessly!!"

'Now then, in what way should I handle this?' Amidst my pondering, when I noticed it, Bertia has already started to run wildly. The fact that she furrowed her eyebrows with

tears showing on her face as if she was enduring something has caught my attention.

At her words from before, I naturally also furrowed my eyebrows deeply.

This is no good. Recently, my feelings have started to project easily on my facial expression when it comes to the matters related to Bertia.

If it were other things, no matter what was told to me or no matter what was done to me, I'd be able to let it all go past with a smile easily, so I wonder why?

"By compelling force, I wonder did something happen?"

Following those words, somehow there is one question that got caught up in my throat. *'Did something happen again with Baroness Heronia?'*

It is not good for me to be making a statement that doubted someone imprudently when there is no evidence whatsoever.

Especially for the likes of me who's got a high status and influence, I have to be really careful in this kind of circumstances.

Restrain the pressing impulse, take a deep breath once, and keep your mind.

Once I have regained my awareness back and relaxed my eyebrows, if I were to launch my usual sweet smile, Bertia would nervously examined my expression with her upturned eyes.

If I were to urge her to continue the story by deepening my smile even further, she would squeak her lips once and try to keep it closed. Because it then turned into a serious expression, it also brought about a grave ambience, and she slowly opened her mouth.

"Since it's Cecil-sama, I will tell you. Actually, I... have gotten weight."

".....Hm?"

"I'm telling you, I'm getting fatter!!"

"...Uhm, what do you mean?"

Towards Bertia's earnest expression, I also thought to inquire more about her story with my serious look. And since she didn't really understand my insistence, she would begin to spontaneously tilt her head with a question mark on her mind.

It was the usual occurrence, but she went above my expectation.

She is truly a mysterious and interesting woman.

"During last year's autumn, precisely right after the [school festival] ended, for some reason, I have begun to gradually gain more weight. At first, I didn't understand why, but I've managed to realize it! This is the so-called [compelling force]!!"

Bertia held her own cheeks with both of her hands, as she earnestly talked about it with a shocked expression, but... I don't really get what she's talking about.

"Tia, there are several things that I want to comment, but for the moment, there is one question that I'd like to ask you, is that okay? Why would your getting fatter become the so-called [compelling force]?"

At my question, Bertia had a slightly dissatisfied expression that seemed as if she was asking, *'why wouldn't you understand that?'*—though she didn't really say it.

...But I think I'm asking a proper question here.

"That is because, you know, after the first time I met Cecil-sama, I went on a strict diet in order to overcome my fate of becoming a third-rate villainess, so that I would overthrow the establishment of the original game's chubby self. Despite this, now that the downfall is right before our very own eyes, my body build has reverted back to the original game's Bertia's state of figure!!"

Uhm, in other words, since she was [forced] to get closer to the appearance of Bertia that came out in that [Otome Game], she thought that it was the [compelling force] that started to begin working... Is it okay for me to perceive it like that?

Well~, I think this is where I'm supposed to laugh?

No, Bertia seems to be very serious, so it's better for me to not laugh.

If that's the case, then I think it's better for me to give her an accurate explanation.

“Look here, Bertia. It might seem bad for you who’ve been earnestly worried over it, but the increase in your weight might not be due to the so-called [compelling force], but I think it’s because of the content of your pocket that caused your dress to expand a lot, wouldn’t you think so?”

“The inside of my pocket?”

She frowned quizzically, and then timidly put her hands inside the concealed pockets located in her own dress, and took out the things inside of them.

“...Are they the sweets you received from Ymir-sama and Otomeria-sama?”

Staring at the two baked sweets on top of her palm, Bertia blankly tilted her head. I spontaneously heaved a sigh in astonishment, and I don’t think this reaction of mine is bad.

“Tia, ever since last year’s autumn, accurately after the [school festival], you’ve begun to receive more sweets from the other noble daughters, right?”

“Wha-! That is certainly the case!! For some reason, the people who didn’t try to engage in friendships with me suddenly began to give me sweets. Could it be, the [compelling force] has already started ever since that time...”

“That’s not it. After the event called [school festival], it has become a common knowledge that you are a lovely woman, and so the noble daughters who wanted to get along with you have started to approach you by giving your favorite things as the evidence of their intention. That’s just it.”

Actually, since the top rankings during the event to select the best couple were all monopolized by the noble daughters who were closely associated with Bertia and the fact that those noble daughters have been giving Bertia sweets was witnessed by a lot of noble daughters, a rumor has started to flow as if it was true. The rumor goes as this, ‘If you present sweets to Marquess Bertia Evil Noches, your long-yearned love would come true, you will fortuitously find a dreamy love and become happy.’

Thus, there was an outbreak in the number of students who presented sweets to Bertia, but... since Bertia has her conscientiousness, each time she received the sweets, they would exchange greetings and then became [acquaintances], then after they got acquainted, there were a few people who’d sometimes consult their love or ask for advice or assistance, resulting in them being joined together splendidly. And

so it has turned into such a condition where the rumor continued to be expedited even more.

Hence, since the amount of sweets presented to her increased, Bertia who [consumed] them would naturally gain more weight, such was the case.

In other words, since there is a reason for the outcome, this is not the sort of thing such as the so-called [compelling force] that Bertia talked about.

Aah, afterwards, since Bertia didn't want to overdevelop her muscles, she would keep a [moderate] amount of exercises, so perhaps that also enhanced the effect of her weight accumulation.

"No, it's unmistakably the compelling force..."

"No, wouldn't it be fine to just reduce the amount of snacks you eat? And while you're at it, it's fine to temporarily increase your amount of exercise, but do it in moderation, all right?"

I cut off Bertia's remark as she was still trying to push the blame for her weight gain onto the [compelling force], completely ending it there.

It wouldn't be good for her health if I were to pamper her and let her believe in her strange rationalization on how [it can't be helped that I got fatter].

Moreover, it would be troublesome if she were to behave recklessly under the impression that the [compelling force] had begun to operate.

"B-but, to not eat what was kindly gifted to me..."

"How about sharing it with the maids and eating just a little?"

"My sweets..."

"You're aiming to be first class, right?"

"..."

Between my arms, Bertia hung her head dejectedly.

However, since she didn't say no, it seemed that she agreed to my suggestion, albeit reluctantly.

"Ah, that's right. In addition, if you are aiming to be a first class villainess, then Tia, it wouldn't be good if you were not by my side, right?"

Next, I should forcefully emphasize that notion.

This time, she distanced herself from me under a pretext as incomprehensible as, *'The [compelling force] has started to work. Hence, I must separate myself from the capture target, namely His Highness, Cecil.'*

She has comprehended that it was all her misunderstanding, but hereafter, my graduation ceremony is approaching along with the [Downfall] she speaks of, so I have no doubt she would feel insecure and behave recklessly because of it.

Though it did sound fun to have a chase each time, it was way too inefficient.

Since that was the case, I decided it would be easier to observe and control her if I were to tie her to me first.

"Wh, why? Cecil-sama is going to become lovey-dovey with the heroine from now on, and is bound to gradually be separated from me. I'll be desperate to hold onto that Cecil-sama, and rush down the villainess road. And, you, feeling that I am truly unpleasant at that time, on the day of the graduation ceremony..."

While speaking, tears rapidly emerged in Bertia's eyes and it wouldn't be strange if they spilled over at any moment.

Seeing Bertia rapidly blinking to hold back the tears while staring fixedly at her own hand grasping the front of my shirt, I reflexively displayed a bitter smile.

...If it's really that heartbreaking, then it's fine for her to not rush along the path of a villainess and just be my fiancée as it is.

Even though such thoughts arose in my heart, I wouldn't tell her.

Though I wouldn't have told her to begin with, but since she has her own reasons, anything I spoke of would probably end up with being resisted anyway.

If that's the case, then I should take the necessary measures while being unnoticed by her, and then all I have to do is just overcome the events that will happen on the day of the graduation ceremony.

I am sure she will be convinced once we are able to overcome that day just fine.

...Or to be more accurate, if she makes any vain struggle even after the result is out, then I'll just have to overturn that.

Furthermore, it wouldn't be an issue if she could feel relieved, like '*surprisingly, everything turned out fine.*'

Besides, in the unlikely event that something does go wrong, as long as I take precautions against most things to some extent, I'll be able to adjust and do something about it.

Even up until now, there hasn't been anything I haven't been able to adapt to.

Then, all that's left is just how I could enjoy the situation.

"I'm telling you, Tia. In order for you to be a splendid villainess, you must be by my side and monopolize me. Because if you do so, you will become an existence that stands in front of the [heroine] and blocks her way."

"Eh?"

"After all, your role is to burn with jealousy when the [heroine] ensnares my heart, right? Since that's the case, first you have to cling closely to me and do your best to look over your shoulder¹, all right?"

"B-but it's difficult for me to be by Cecil-sama's side anymore than this."

"What's difficult about it?"

"If we get really close, parting and betrayal will also be harder to bear, won't they? If we become any closer than now, I, I won't be able to bear being treated so coldly and unfriendly at the end."

Seeing Bertia with tears in her eyes and her head cast downwards as if she's enduring her overwhelming feelings, I felt a small ache in my heart.

Perhaps by letting her go now, it would be good for guaranteeing her heart's tranquility.

However...

"Then, I just have to not be cold to Tia until the end. If so, then wouldn't everything be all right?"

"Is there a way for [The Downfall] to be completed without you being cold to me?"

"Of course. Without being cold [to Tia], [The Downfall] will still be able to continue, so be relieved. So, won't you leave that all to me?"

"Really?"

"Without a doubt."

To reassure her, I gently patted her head and smiled.

Upon which, though she had an uneasy expression, she slowly raised her head to me.

"Then, I'll also try harder without running away from these feelings just a little bit more. Because I am a first-class villainess!!"

I silently nodded my head towards Bertia who had a resolute expression.

Sorry, Bertia.

I unexpectedly am enjoying my life at present.

That's why I'm unwilling to part with the distinct color you bring to my life.

Because there is no life more painful than a boring life.

But, I'll properly keep this promise.

A [Downfall] without being cold [to Tia].

In other words, it'd be fine to just do the [downfall] to someone else, right?

While watching Bertia holding back her tears with both hands clutched in front of her chest, I was speculating inside my head about what kind of [scenario] I should do.

Now then, I've decided on a strategy.

Because Bertia also returned to her original stable state of mind, all that's left is how I should approach the end.

Well, since there are already various controllable pieces and materials gathered, all that's left is how I should mobilize them.

"Hey, Kulgan. Recently, I heard that Baroness Heronia has been visiting your place quite frequently. How is she like?"

I asked Kulgan, one of my close aide candidates who was a student council member when we were in middle school division and similarly, also became a student council member in the high school division. Towards my inquiry, his hands, which were quietly working on administrative duties, stopped moving, and he turned his head to face me.

Even when there is no large-scale event going on, my aide candidates would naturally gather in the student council room everyday to work on things such as managing the student council itself, assisting me with my private royalty-related affairs and many other things.

Like always, the other members of my aide candidates gathered today as well. They also reacted to the words I uttered, specifically at the mention of [Baroness Heronia], which made their movements stop as they turned their gazes towards Kulgan and me.

"It's not a very good feeling. She's irritating as usual, but in addition to that, she's been enquiring of me about Bertia-sama and Bertia-sama's household."

"For example... *'do you know of any wrongdoing they've committed?'*"

When I smiled and asked him that, Kulgan showed an astonished expression. Despite that, he nodded while furrowing his eyebrows.

"There've been several occasions where she's asked questions such as if I'd heard any

bad rumors concerning Bertia-sama's household, or if I was being embroiled in troubles caused by Bertia-sama's relatives."

"Hmm~"

...As expected.

When Bertia talked about the [Otome game] before, she mentioned that Kulgan played a critical role in her [Downfall] event.

With this sort of timing where the [Downfall] Bertia spoke of is only just next year, when you think about it, Baroness Heronia's frequent approaches to Kulgan is, without a doubt, for the purpose of preparing for Bertia's [Downfall].

In truth, I managed to grasp the hidden meaning behind Kulgan's remark just now.

"What are you chatting about? Are you having a fun conspiracy talk? Lady Heronia has been causing me discomfort over the matter concerning Lady Anne, so may I lend a hand?"

Charles, who had been eavesdropping on our conversation, cut in with a broad grin while resting his chin in his hands.

Come to think of it, Charles has been quite irritated by Baroness Heronia since she kept telling him over and over again to give up on Lady Anne.

She also told Lady Anne that, 'Charles is an incessant womanizer'. On top of feeding her with a mixture of facts and lies, she also strongly recommended Lady Anne to proceed with her marriage talks to Charles' brother.

Well, no matter how gentle Charles is towards the ladies, it's justified for him to get mad at someone who would conspicuously hinder his romance that he painstakingly managed to seize.

"If that's the case, then I'm in the same boat. Even while I was reading a book, she would be next to me continuously speaking badly of Silica, and though she didn't understand anything, she asked me, 'Wasn't it difficult for you?' It irked me. Despite the fact that Silica scolded me out of her love to me. Silica was so adorable whenever she would eventually take care of me despite complaining."

Nert muttered with a sullen expression as he furrowed his eyebrows and raised his head from his book.

As expected of Baroness Heronia, she managed to anger Nert who is rare to anger.

“I’m also in this. Though I hate to swarm around and deprecate someone together... I dislike her. Even when I thought I could finally go on a long riding date with Lady Cynthia, just the two of us, she unexpectedly asked to tag along with us. While it couldn’t be helped that she tagged along with us, but in the end she couldn’t adjust herself to our speed, and then grumbled about returning midway. Just how many dates have been ruined by her...”

Ah~, from what I could grasp, it seems like Baroness Heronia is a person who can mount a horse, but is quite reckless to think that she would like to keep up with Bard and Lady Cynthia.

Nevertheless, it could even be said that in a sense, she is a person who battles on in difficult circumstances and resolutely tries hard to do something over and over again. Still, it isn’t good for her to ruin those engaged couples’ dates.

Furthermore, from Bard’s statement, it seems like she didn’t do it just once or twice, but has repeatedly done so many times over.

Although Bard would basically get angry for only a short period of time, he’s the type who wouldn’t budge.

However, so long as someone repeats the same mistake without even slight remorse, the likelihood of him not minding it would gradually drop.

“I also can’t bring myself to like her. After all, she has said lots of things that hurt my Joanna.”

Shaun has just entered the high school division, so he hasn’t become a student council member yet. Despite that, he would hang out in the student council room. Taking this opportunity, Shaun also complained with his sharp words.

Well, it’s inevitable for the [Capture Targets] to be fed up with [the Heroine] as she kept repeating her coercive approaches while ignoring the occasion and state of affairs, disregarding how each one of them already has their respective partner.

...Because the power of her light spirit gets interrupted by Kuro's dark defensive power, the special effects aren't functioning at all.

"I actually dislike conspiracy. I just need to think of a defensive plan to protect my fiancée. Of course, I'll treat her as just a complete stranger only if she doesn't intentionally hurt my fiancée."

"That is a matter of course. It's something necessary for us, too, right?"

Without missing a beat, the other members also nodded in agreement with Charles who pointed that out while showing his usual smile.

Well, it's because they are all in the same position of being mutual lovers or fiancés.

As men, if there is a possibility of our partners getting hurt, obviously we would think of protecting them.

"If we are all in agreement on how it's indispensable for us to think of a defensive plan, it's only reasonable for us to cooperate with one another, don't you think so, Your Highness?"

When the word [cooperation] was mentioned, I can clearly understand that you're looking at me with an expression that is trying to tell me to take the command, isn't that right, Charles?

...Certainly, I think that it would be the safest option to entrust these members with my [scenario], since they will surely be able to execute it accordingly.

As Charles and Kulgan have the ability to judge others' characters, they would be able to behave rationally. It might be best to allow them to move independently.

However, for someone like Bard who's simple and stu... honest, it's possible that he might behave recklessly and trust other people without thinking of the consequences. Shaun and Nert were raised indulgently, so they might not be skilled at dealing with other people. It would be troublesome if these guys were to move imprudently because they can't read others' hidden intention and thoughts.

Because I've long been associating with them, it's not like I can't read all of their

behavioral patterns. However, since I can read it, that's why I understand the things that can be called risk factors.

"Ye~s, ganging up on a frail (though I don't know if she is indeed frail) lady and attacking her is violating the gentlemen's code, so I don't really want to do it, but... when we're cooperating to set up some traps as our defensive measure in order to protect our beloveds, it can't be helped if someone gets caught in that [trap], right?"

After pretending to be troubled for a bit, they smiled and nodded and each gave their consent to the proposal of manufacturing traps as a compromise plan.

Indeed, it can be said that it's quite immature for everyone to be ganging up together to repulse a single noble daughter under a trivial reason such as [because she's harassing our lovers], as we are all men who are carrying the burden of being the country's central figures in the future.

However, if our opponent demonstrated a clear hostility towards us, then that won't be the case anymore.

After all, if there comes someone grasping a sword in front of your beloved person and you would greet them with empty hands just because the opponent is female, then it won't be enough no matter how many lives you and your beloved person possess.

If that's the case...

By setting up [traps], it means you can create [reasons] for a counter attack in order to protect your beloved person from the opponent's clear [malice].

Naturally, the [malice] and [reasons] are arranged to prepare [the real thing] that's free from lies, deceptions, broad interpretations, etc.

That's why, even if we set up some [traps], if she actually doesn't hold any [malice], then her sins won't become apparent.

By all means, the best case for both sides would be if nothing happens, but... Honestly speaking, I don't mind whichever happens.

I'm fine as long as my fiancée doesn't have a hard time, and so long as I can arrange the circumstances in which she would be by my side and entertain me as always.

Besides that point, I don't have any interest in Baroness Heronia.

Aah, but, well, since she is also a citizen of this country, as the crown prince, I'd still have to do something to deal with her if she were to cause trouble for this country.

"For the moment, I will be reporting whenever she's acting fishy... And Kulgan, if she comes to you to enquire something again, can you deal with her appropriately in a thoughtful manner without giving any denial or affirmation?"

"Of course I won't affirm anything, but should I really not negate any of her unjust suspicions?"

Perhaps unable to grasp the intention behind my instruction, Kulgan furrowed his eyebrows and showed a perplexed expression.

Facing his reaction, I nodded and smiled as usual.

"Yeah, don't deny it as well. From what she can perceive from your reaction, I wonder what kind of movement she will make. That's what I want her to show me... Since Bertia and Marquis Noches haven't done anything shady, then there shouldn't be a problem, right?"

I gave a half-smile and sent Kulgan a profound gaze.

For the others, it might seem that my words earlier contained too little information to be executed, and they weren't able to surmise my intention. However, it seems what I wanted to say was conveyed well enough for Kulgan to understand with just that.

"I see. As expected of Your Highness! However, will my little sister... will Bertia-sama be exposed to any danger that way?"

Kulgan showed his cold and satisfactory expression, but the next moment, perhaps because he thought of Bertia, he slightly scowled in concern.

I don't really care on why he seemed to be worried... No, I do care, after all! Why did you address Bertia as [my little sister] just now?

Could it be that you've been addressing her like that deep inside your heart, and that it carelessly left your mouth just now?

...It might be necessary for me to find an opportunity to discuss this with him.

“I won’t let my fiancée, Tia, be exposed to any danger. For that reason, we won’t be attacking until [the very last moment]. Avoid provoking Baroness Heronia and just monitor her thoughts and movements for now. Even if she were to attack, it’s important to just skillfully evade her attacks without making any counter attacks until that time... Fortunately, Bertia has agreed to promise me that she will increase her time with me, so all of you should use the same pretext to increase your time together with your beloved person. During the time when they can’t be together with us, if you remind them to stay alert, the girls are smart so they will surely be able to protect one another, won’t they?”

“With all due respect, the other noble girls might be like that, but I feel like if we try to warn Bertia-sama, she will react to the contrary and charge ahead...”

Kulgan smiled bitterly, and somehow that smile seems to be filled with warm affection.

Yes. I know Bertia very well. I think so, too.

...It’s just, I wonder what I should think of this mood arising from him gazing lovingly at the actions of the cute little sister who’s not that far apart from him in age?

She might be your little sister, but she isn’t your lover or fiancée, okay?

“...That’s right. I think so, too. That’s why I’d be pleased if you could try to conceal this matter from Bertia, all right?”

Once I turned my eyes to take a glance at everyone inside the room one by one, all of them seriously nodded.

Because everyone here has been baptized by Bertia somehow, obviously they would understand the terrifying consequences of giving Bertia any excessive information.

...Because there have been occasions where she acts in a simple and pure manner without any good or bad intentions.

“Well then, for the moment, unless Baroness Heronia moves in a very dangerous manner, just evade her temporarily and gather information while keenly observing her, okay? We shall hand down the final judgement... let’s see, shall we set the timing as the graduation ceremony?”

From Bertia's talk about the [otome game] and according to the [scenario], surely Baroness Heronia will move at that time, right?

Still, there is no way I can talk about it with everyone here, so as long as I choose the time limit based on a plausible reason such as [I want to settle everything while we are still in the school as a third year students. That's why, I'm limiting the time to be at our graduation ceremony], they would agree without any suspicion.

After that, as long as we arrange the preparations until then... it would be sufficient to just wait for the other side to make their action while protecting Bertia.

Aah, of course, I shall have Kulgan operate in various ways for the sake of those preparations.

So that he won't have any opportunity to meet Bertia, of course he should be occupied.

"Now then, let's look forward to how it will turn out?"

As I smiled with a brisk feeling after deciding the rough [scenario], everyone who's present on the spot looked at me and smiled.

Why is it that, for some reason, those smiles seem very villainous?

...Well, should I conclude that it's just my imagination?





“Father, would you happen to know anything about [the fated girl]?”

The day after I gave up obtaining any information from Bertia and Baroness Heronia, I adjusted my schedule and returned to the royal palace in order to gather information about the phrase that somehow strangely got stuck in my head.

Since I didn’t obtain the information that I wanted from the library, I thought that I might find some information about it among the intelligence passed down from successive rulers or any tradition related with [me]–the royalty. In order to confirm that, I paid a visit to my father.

I bought some baked sweets from my mother’s favorite confectionery shop, which was located on my way back to the royal palace from Halm Academy, and prepared material that my father needed for his current government affairs as well as a summary of the information that I dearly desired.

Although my father was very busy as the king, once I curried my mother’s favour by bringing what she liked and told father that I have some information that can help in advancing his government affairs smoothly, he quickly made a time for me with pleasure.

“[The fated girl]? You’ve taken an interest in something quite romantic, huh?”

After personally handing over the offering for my mother to the grand chamberlain with great care, my father who held the materials I brought with a beaming expression, widened his eyes a little and unexpectedly stared at me.

“It is a phrase that came up as a keyword in a matter that I’m personally investigating, but I’m troubled because I can’t really grasp the original meaning behind those words.”

“So even you have something that you can’t understand to the extent that you’re troubled by it. Have you tried to look it up in the library?”

I smiled at my father who was looking at me as if he was looking at a rare animal.

“I have looked it up there, but I couldn’t find it. No, to be more accurate, there are a lot of stories in which the similar phrase came up, but honestly, I couldn’t judge if any of them were relevant.”

“Then, why would you ask me?”

“It seems that it is something related to the royalty. If that is the case, I think that it won’t be unthinkable for father to know it if it’s an important existence.”

I constantly smiled despite my father giving me a doubtful expression as he shrewdly raised his eyebrows.

Truthfully, I don’t really understand whether it is something that’s related to the royalty or if it’s something that’s only related to me, but I purposely asserted that it is something that’s [related to the royalty].

In case that the matter turned out to be a top secret related to the royalty, my father will handle the judgement from his position as a king first before his position as my father, whether or not he could give me the information.

In this case, the popular excuse such as [since my son pestered me] won’t work, so it would be better for me to operate by showing hints of holding some information to a certain extent in order to draw more information out from the superior.

““ ...”

We exchanged glances at each other while probing into the other party’s attitude.

My father squinted a little as he tried to probe into my real intention. On the other hand, I remained smiling without any change in my expression.

The one who yielded first was my father.

“Despite being my son, your smile was like an impregnable fortress. I thought I would like to probe into your real reason for asking that question, but I don’t feel like I can pull out any information from you, whose expression doesn’t change even once.”

“There is no more information. I just thought that I might as well investigate it as I was slightly interested because a certain person thoughtlessly predicted that it was something indispensable to me.”

“Really?”

“I’m telling the truth... So, does father happen to have a clue about it?”

In response to my words, Father gazed at an empty space as if he was recalling something and raised his voice, “U-n,” as if he was groaning.

“...Unfortunately, there is nothing coming to mind. Since our country is a big country with a long history, there are various types of prophecy related to the royalty that has been handed down, stories told by oracles concerning the royalty, the legend of the saint, the folklore of the war maiden, and many other stories. However, I can’t think of anything that’s closely related to your story. On the other hand, if we were to draw the category of [the thing that has any resemblance to it in some respects], the results are way too many that I don’t know which one you are seeking.”

“Really?”

“Yes, that’s the truth.”

This time, I squinted my eyes slightly and turned to face my father as if I was trying to probe into him.

My father stared back at me as if saying with his gaze, “I don’t have anything like that.”

I watched him intently so that I won’t overlook any slight movement such as his pupils dilation, his eye movements, his breathing, and his cheek muscles’ movements... and then I loosened my gaze with a sigh.

It is most likely that my father doesn’t lie.

“...Is that so. If even Father doesn’t know about it, perhaps it is only a lie or just some random speech, right?”

“You are still not giving up on it, huh?”

“It’s because I understood that Father didn’t speak any lies. If even Father doesn’t know about it, then it’s certainly not an important affair, or it’s something that doesn’t even exist... Since there shouldn’t be any important matters related to the royalty that Father, who is the king, wouldn’t know.”

When I shrugged my shoulders, Father gave me a sarcastic laugh as if saying, “You’re overestimating me too much.”

“In addition, even if I was interested in it to the extent that I asked you under the

premise that if you knew, there might be some helpful information, but if you don't know about it, then there's no problem at all if it remains unknown."

"Is that all right? Isn't it a [prophecy] that made you demonstrate an apparent interest?"

"It's [thoughtless remarks that look like a prophecy]. After all, I have a fiancée named Lady Bertia. In truth, if such a person really appeared, then she would be nothing but a nuisance. If it becomes troublesome to deal with her, then the most I can do is to leave her as she is. If she's good, then she can be used as a pawn if possible."

"Was it the [fated] girl?"

Towards my father who grinned broadly as if he was teasing me, I smiled in my astonishment.

"After all, I have Lady Bertia. Wasn't it what you decided yourself, Father?"

I tried to give a slight emphasis when I mentioned Bertia's name, and Father showed a slightly surprised expression before smiling warmly as if he was feeling relieved.

"I see. That's right... Hey, Cecil."

"What is it?"

"Is your life fun right now?"

I tilted my head reflexively towards the sudden question because I couldn't understand his intention.

However, even if I couldn't understand his intention, I have decided the answer to that question even without thinking.

"Yes, it's fun. After all, my fiancée is always so amusing."

"Then, that's good... It means that my eyes didn't fail me when I decided on her as your fiancée."

"Would you like it if I were to say, [as expected of Father!] here?"

“Isn’t it fine to praise me more?”

“I will leave that role for Mother. Wouldn’t you be happier that way too, Father?”

When I said it in a slightly jesting tone, Father stared blankly for a moment before letting out his voice and laughed, “Hahaha.”

“That is certainly true. It would be better for me to report this matter to Olivia and have her praise me while we’re in bed. I would surely be very delighted that way, don’t you think so?”

“Father, Mother is not that young anymore, so can you please keep it at a moderate amount?”

“Hm? What are you referring at?”

“Don’t play stupid. To think that I won’t understand your implication, I’m not a child anymore, you know? Also, please refrain from bringing up such a delicate subject in front of your own son.”

“I don’t really understand the meaning behind your words.”

“...If that’s the case, then it wouldn’t be a problem if I were to go to Bertia right away to do the thing that Father’s trying to do to Mother, right? Of course, if someone were to question it, I will answer confidently that [His Majesty, the King permitted me.]”

“Stop that!! At least until your wedding ceremony!! I would be killed by the Prime Minister and Olivia who’s taken a liking to her!!”

“It won’t be a problem as I was just going to have her praise me, right?”

“...It was my bad. I’m begging you, please keep your relationship moderate as a good crown prince until your marriage.”

Towards my sulky father whose lips pouted as he scratched his head boisterously, I showed my bitter smile and grumbled, “It can’t be helped.”

As the king of this country, I think that he’s a good and dignified king from my point of view, but... Once he was separated from the affairs of the state, his face as just a father looked quite miserable.

Still, I unexpectedly don't hate that side of my father, too.

...I feel like it's fun watching him like this, but not to the extent as the amusement I got from Bertia.

"Well then, it's about time I should be taking my leave."

Though I couldn't find the answer that I was looking for, I heard everything I needed to, so I should take my leave now. I greeted my father as I headed towards the exit.

My father reminded me again, "keep your relationship moderate," but I just ignored it with a smile.

...Naturally, I'm not willing to do something that can hurt Bertia, but it's fun seeing my father's face turning pale, so I just went with it.

As I finished my greetings and walked towards the door, suddenly I heard a voice calling me to halt my steps from behind.

I turned around only halfway and faced my father while wondering if he might still have something he wanted to tell me.

Then, to my surprise, I saw my father with his serious expression.

"...Cecil, you're a very excellent son that I can boast about. However, just because you're excellent, it doesn't mean that you won't have any worries. In fact, because you're excellent, you are bound to have some worries. I may be unreliable, but if you're troubled, then come here and discuss it with me at any time."

I don't understand why would Father say that kind of thing so abruptly.

However, when I witnessed that face of a [father], and the moment I heard his words, I strangely acquired a sense of relief.

Then, I suddenly realized.

Deep inside me, the emotion known as [anxiety] that I hadn't experienced up until now was quietly lying down there.

When I decided on the [scenario] hereafter, there wasn't any element of anxiety.

There is certainly a feeling that I would be able to manage it somehow, and I arranged the preparations by believing that alone.

It's troublesome to have something to do with spirits, but the moment I remembered Bertia thought that magic didn't exist in this world midway, I speculated that it wasn't necessarily the work of an unknown big force that we couldn't manipulate.

Moreover, in the worst case where such power was exercised, we have two superior spirits named Zeno and Kuro by our side. It couldn't be that big of a threat.

Logically thinking, there shouldn't be any element of anxiety.

That's why, I thought that I wasn't anxious at all.

However, when I felt relieved due to my father's words, I realized for the first time that there existed a small quantity of [baseless anxiety].

Aah, how pathetic.

"Thank you very much, Father. At that time, I will depend on you mercilessly, so please be prepared."

"Yeah, leave it to me. Accompanying you to worry about a matter is something your father is capable of doing."

"Didn't you just talk big, asking me to leave everything to you?"

"Parents of an extraordinarily excellent son are modest."

"I think that's each to their own."

"I think so, too."

After grinning and exchanging glances at each other, I pretended not to see him this time and turned around to go towards the door.

Before going out from the door, I upheld my manners by saying, "Excuse me." And when I glanced at my father's figure, he has already returned to his usual expression as a king, focusing his attention to the documents I presented.

Towards that father of mine, I muttered a small [thank you] in my mind.

Chapter 11

Bertia 17 Years Old (1)

“Tia, what color would you like for your graduation party dress?”

Finally, something happened one day on an early afternoon, three months before my graduation ceremony.

That day, the school-related events and lessons finished early, and I passed the time leisurely drinking tea together with Bertia at a deluxe suite.

Bertia listened to my request and spent her time together with me whenever she was available, but her usual glittering and sparkling eyes darkened as soon as the topic of the graduation ceremony was brought up.

Because of that, I tried not to bring up anything related to Baroness Heronia, the graduation ceremony, and the otome game as much as I could.

I detested purposely bringing up the kinds of topics that make her eyes darken. When such a time comes, I think it's irrational to have an argument with each other that has no end in sight, and letting the matter run its course is also concerning.

However, now that the graduation ceremony was coming up soon, I had to say something about that topic.

Regarding the matter of Baroness Heronia, we have been steadily proceeding in our private circle with everything without Bertia, the other students, or the teachers knowing about it. All the necessary preparations were finished so there was no problem, but the preparations for the graduation ceremony itself couldn't be carried out within just [our private circle].

Needless to say, I had to have Bertia, who's my fiancée participate as my partner on the appointed day.

“Graduation party dress?”

The happy expression that Bertia had, as she stuffed many bite-sized baked sweets that could be eaten in one go into her mouth, changed into a stiffened expression.

...It's not a big deal, but the point of the baked sweets being small enough to be eaten in one go should be to avoid the stuffy cheeks that you have right now, you know? If you put a lot of pieces at the same time into your mouth, then there's no meaning to it, right?

Then, she tried to gulp down her saliva... or so I thought, but since her mouth was packed with stuff, one would normally end up gulping down the food. With that, her figure wouldn't look good, right?

"Yeah, that's right. It's a general rule to go to the graduation party with a partner. And there's an implicit rule dictating that those with fiancées should go along with their engagement partners... Since you're kind, you wouldn't refuse to come as your fiancé's partner and make me end up as a pitiful man, right? That's why, I would like to give you a dress as a present for being so kind."

In order to brighten up the atmosphere of the place even for a little bit, I purposely made fun of her, and Bertia clumsily smiled a bit.

"Bu-but, wouldn't it be fine to go with the heroine? Instead of me, giving the dress to her would be..."

"Tia. I'm asking my partner, and that's you."

Bertia looked at me with her upturned eyes and an uneasy gaze, and the words I let out in order to interrupt her words were unexpectedly biting that even I was astonished at myself.

Perhaps because she noticed the irritation that my voice contained, her body trembled with a jump, and the sweets she held on her hand were crushed on the spur of the moment.

"...Ah, you're really... Your beloved sweets were destroyed, you know?"

I paused briefly as I held back the irritation that was welling up inside of me and stood up as if nothing stood over the table and took her hands that were grimy from the wreckage of the sweets.

The moment I touched her hand, this time, her hand trembled once more in her uneasiness, but I pretended not to notice it and slowly opened her hand, collecting the crushed sweets.

It's bad after all, isn't it?

Perhaps it's due to the instability that comes with puberty that my emotions were very unstable these days.

Without even noticing it myself, I ended up feeling restless at her every action.

Since I have never lived with this kind of thing up until now, I was honestly perplexed.

Well, but for some reason, as long as it wasn't a matter related to her, I could operate as usual. Because my feelings weren't particularly unstable, it didn't impede me from doing my duties as the crown prince, so it wasn't particularly a big problem.

"Yeah, the sweets were quite delicious."

During the time when her maids were quickly preparing for a wet cloth in order to wipe her hand, I tossed a piece of the broken sweet from her hand into my mouth.

The form was distorted, but the sweetness that spread through my mouth brought some kind of a nostalgic feeling somewhere and managed to make me calm down.

When she took a glance at me, her face stiffened and turned bright red as she silently let me keep her hand.

When I looked at her appearance, I felt more healed compared to when I tasted the sweets' sugary taste.

"Yes, it's clean now."

I instructed Zeno with my gaze to bring over a chair next to her, where I sat down and took the wet cloth that the maids brought and wiped her hand myself.

The maids seemed to hesitate in giving me the task of wiping Bertia's hand as I am the crown prince, but when I smiled sweetly, they finally handed over the wet cloth without a word.

“So, Tia. What color would you like?”

After I finished wiping her hand, I placed it under my own palm and lightly grasped it... As if giving me a warning, Kuro who was right behind me knocked her bushy tail at my chair.

...I understand. Under the public gaze like this, I won't do anything more than this.

“Color...”

“Yes, the color. I have the design at my disposal, so could you decide it? Of course, I have properly selected something that would suit you well.”

When I repeated the same question twice, Bertia whose face was still bright red slowly began to think. As I observed her like that, I smiled at her.

She seemed like she wanted to say something, but when she saw my smile with her sidelong glance, she couldn't voice any more words of refusal.

“...A calming yellow. N-no! As expected, blue is good!!”

After a bit of consideration, she chose the color that she usually wore the most with a slightly bashful expression... Then, her expression turned into a slightly taken aback expression, and she quickly retracted her choice and chose a different color.

When I inclined my head because I sensed something out of place in her reaction, she raised her eyebrows and gave me a troubled smile that looked like she wanted to cry.

“A-another different color will also do. Like red, or black, or... Yes, that's right! A color that's more villainous-like will be...”

Her hand grasped my hand tighter.

It might be her unconscious action, but I felt like that action of hers seemed as if she was clinging to me.

This girl who chose another color for her dress that's different from the color of my hair that she usually wears.

She rejected even the color of my eyes as if she was compromising and began to pick

another color under the pretext of [more villainous-like].

From yellow to blue.

From blue to red or black.

From red or black to designating a color that's [more villainous-like].

Each time she blinked, the sadness in her eyes deepened, and I reflexively wrinkled my eyebrows at her as she swapped to colors that felt like she was getting further away from me with each one.

"Hey, Tia. Why don't you go with the usual yellow color?... Or have you lost interest in yellow?"

Instead of somehow stopping my voice from lowering naturally, I narrowed my eyes as I smiled like always.

With eyes dyed in sorrow, she hung her head and didn't notice the extremely unpleasant smile plastered to my face.

The feeling of [losing interest] that can't really be described, is the most clear and familiar feeling to me.

Even for things that I thought might be good or kind of interesting, most of the time, they followed how I'd imagine them to go so I quickly tired of them.

If I just saw some of the beginning, I generally got the gist of how things would turn out, so I couldn't find it interesting.

I have experienced this kind of feeling many times over.

When that happens, the [interest] born inside of me would disappear in no time, and the thing that I felt to be slightly special up until that point would be considered as something no different from a stone rolling over on the roadside.

I was so used to that kind of thing as an everyday occurrence, but for the first time ever, I felt anxious when the position was reversed and I was put in the position of something she lost her interest in.

[Losing interest] is a familiar sensation. Therefore, the moment I thought of the possibility of her [losing interest in me], I had a vivid hunch of how her feelings had changed, and my heart felt as if it was grasped tightly, and I was attacked by the sensation of a cold chill running down my spine.

...No, why was I getting frightened by the thought of something foolish?

Her eyes are grieving over being separated from me and her [downfall] through me.

Her hand grasped tightly to mine, as if she was clinging to me.

Contrary to the words she spoke and the path she aimed at, her whole body revealed her true feelings towards me.

Because I compete against so many old schemers, I am not weak at probing into the subtle signs of others' emotions.

Even when taking that point out of consideration, since Bertia was fundamentally honest, despite whatever came out from her mouth, her feelings inevitably leaked out from the mood behind her actions and expressions.

There's no way I could make a mistake in reading her.

I should have understood that, but contrary to logic, my heart selfishly felt uneasy.

It's different from the kind of anxiety from instinct or intuition.

It was the feeling of being frightened that something with less than 1% possibility, was still not a 0% possibility.

"...I love yellow. Particularly the one with a hue similar to the calming color of milk tea, I just love it. Moreover, I also love the blue color that's similar to the clear night sky."

So she says, and right now, she's wearing a dress with a color that really resembles my hair and the antidote necklace I gave her resembling the color of my eyes, which she lovingly stroked with her free hand.

Aah, as expected, she is...

As I thought to myself, I exhaled the breath I had unconsciously been holding.

“...But, that’s exactly why I don’t want to wear them to the place where the [downfall] will happen. Such precious colors... Colors packed with lots of beloved memories... I don’t want sad memories to paint over them.”

I felt my stomach dropping.

And again, it’s as I thought.

...Why are you trying to stay away from me so stubbornly?

“Hey, Tia. If it’s really that sad, then what if we just don’t do the [downfall]?”

I pulled her hand that was grasping tightly onto the necklace that I gave her towards me, and covered it with my other hand.

I bundled both of her hands and gently wrapped them up in both of my mine before I spoke in a soft tone to admonish her consciousness.

I noticed that her eyes that looked back at me in surprise were quivering as if in turmoil.

However, the core that existed deep inside her quivering eyes contained the look of determination that didn’t waver the slightest bit.

“That’s impossible. After all, I really want Cecil-sama to be happy. I want you and everyone else to be happy.”

A bitter feeling filled my heart as she bit her lips tightly.

“If you think that way, then could you tell me the reason why others and I can’t be happy unless the [downfall] is accomplished? Even if you couldn’t find a method on your own other than achieving the [downfall], perhaps the two of us might be able to find a better method?”

Especially in Bertia’s case, even though she’s superior in terms of her studies, she’s devastatingly poor at things like sensing the feelings or schemes of other people, keeping an eye on the situation and staying one step ahead of the other party to lead things in a favorable direction for herself.

Her strategy relies on her nerves and the methods are at a level that can't even be called strategies.

Fortunately, she was blessed with talented people surrounding her and she was quite popular, too. So, I thought that as long as I securely follow up for her, she'd manage somehow as the future queen. But in terms of the issue of her personal abilities, she would probably be classified as an [idiot].

Even though she told me, "there is no other way," she's not very persuasive.

There's a high possibility that there is a better method, but she just hasn't realized it because she is an [idiot].

...If she'd only just tell me what important information she has hidden within her heart.

Though I think so, Bertia obstinately wouldn't confess about the thing related to that matter alone.

Because I understand that, I have stopped asking her about that matter.

Since it would be useless to spend my time towards something that wouldn't produce any outcome, that's why I thought that I should prioritize doing something that can be done.

However, for some reason, I couldn't refrain myself from asking her now despite knowing that it would be futile.

Despite the fact that the possibility she would talk is drastically low, making these feelings of wanting her to naturally tell me, of wanting her to rely on me, meaningless.

Even though my mind could think rationally, I realized that I was strangely operating on the dubious component called feelings.

Aah, how foolish.

I'm such a fool.

I wonder if Bertia's idiocy was projected onto me before I even realized it?

“I can’t do that! Because...”

“Because?”

Bertia started to say something before tightly closing that small mouth of hers.

As usual, I stared at her moving mouth that suddenly stopped and attempted to ask her as I tilted my head while paying attention so that my tone wasn’t forceful.

Judging from Bertia’s stubbornness, it was very unlikely that the answer I was seeking would come from her mouth. I knew that, but for some reason, I was still holding my expectations.

However, as expected, my wish didn’t come true.

“I really love everyone. That’s why, I don’t want anyone to get hurt. It is enough that only I... and my father who has committed crimes, be the only ones hurt.”

But... he hasn’t committed any crime?

I quickly swallowed back the words that were reflexively about to come out from my mouth.

Marquis Noches was currently on something of an undercover investigation together with Kulgan.

If I acted untactful and revealed that, it would put them at risk.

It is something that I can’t say right now.

After all, it’s Bertia’s nature that she can’t lie or deceive someone.

Aside from that, if we look at the bottom of the matter, the one who encouraged Marquis Noches to pursue the path of evil was you, right?

Because it is necessary for the [scenario].

I somewhat pitied Marquis Noches.

“Are you regretting your act of encouraging Marquis Noches to pursue the path of evil?”

“No, I’m not regretting it. Because it is something necessary. If it’s not done, then a worse future is definitely waiting. This is a fate that must happen!!”

I’m troubled over how I should reply to Bertia who was clenching her fist tightly with her renewed determination.

...Sorry. I have already smashed that fate properly.

However, there’s nothing to be worried for right now. And as for the trouble hereafter, I have Marquis Noches in the middle of cleaning it up neatly for me, so I think everything will turn out okay, see?

Still, I can’t tell her that.

“That’s why, Cecil-sama, please do the [downfall] without any reservation, and roam on the path of [a lovey-dovey happy end] with the heroine!!”

[Lovey-dovey happy end], was it?

I don’t really understand the meaning of it.

From Bertia’s tone, it would probably mean I’d become happy by being in a loving relationship with Baroness Heronia, but... even if I understand the meaning behind the words, I still can’t understand its significance after all.

The Baroness Heronia from some time ago was a boring person with an unpleasant attitude, but as of now, she’s the enemy who’s hurt my fiancée.

There’s no way I can think of a future where I can be happy loving that kind of person.

No, more importantly before that, it’s normally unthinkable for me, as a person with a fiancée, to choose a path that would connect me with another woman.

Well, if the noble daughter who’s my partner were to have a big flaw, it might be possible to break off the engagement with her given the reason that it was appropriate for the country’s sake.

Bertia is indeed missing a few screws in her head, but for some reason, her popularity is quite high, and if I had to mention her abilities, there would be a fair amount.

She's a naïve person who cares deeply for her mother, and she's also doing her best in her education as the future queen.

...While her memory might be quite a delicate subject, I heard that she managed to rank because her efforts exceeded the others greatly.

In addition, I myself think that she's cute and interesting and that there's no particularly conspicuous flaw.

...There aren't supposed to be any.

.....Because the matter's scope can still be covered, so it's alright... or it should be.

At any rate, so far, I haven't felt any need to consider breaking off my engagement with her and choosing another woman.

Much less, if I were to compare her with Baroness Heronia, then it was certain that Bertia would be declared the winner.

Because there is a large difference between the kind of idiocy that irritated me and the kind of idiocy that I considered cute or amusing.

Besides, I think that my feelings towards these girls would be obvious if you were to look at the way I interacted with them.

One, if you look at my way of addressing them, I've been calling Bertia [Tia], yet I have never even called Baroness Heronia's name even in front of the person herself.

In front of my close aides, there have been times when it was necessary to say her name, but that's only [because it was necessary].

Even so, in accordance with the academy's intention that stated [all students are equal], basically it's an unspoken agreement that when you address a female acquaintance, you should address her with her first name followed by [-sama] or [-jou]. Despite that, I addressed her using [Baroness] as if I purposely wanted it to be heard and be understood that I was treating her as a stranger.

To begin with, in high society, it's not odd for her to be addressed as [Baroness Inderon¹], but there aren't any reasons for her to be addressed as [Baroness Heronia].

The wise people surrounding me would be able to guess my intention of that improper way of addressing her, that I [do not feel like treating her as even an acquaintance].

And then, on top of guessing that matter, since she behaved herself as if nothing had happened despite the fact that I purposely let her experience that, I continued to address her as it is.

And then, on top of being sympathetic to me, they² also purposely, brazenly acted like nothing was wrong, I also continued to address her as so.

The one person who was near me and hadn't noticed would be Bertia.

To be honest, recently, I can't help but keep wondering why she hasn't noticed my very easy-to-understand intentions.

It's true that I operated behind her back so as not to be troublesome, but it was relatively easy to understand that I intended to appeal to our intimacy as fiancés when I was with Bertia.

There's no way I can afford to let the discord between the future king and queen be seen to those who like to spread rumors.

Even Shaun himself said these kinds of lines a few days ago: [Older Brother, you've been excessively concerned about Bertia recently], [As your relative, there were times when I felt embarrassed].

Reality has been altered to the point that it's already far too different from the outline of the world of the [otome game] that Bertia depicted, so I wonder why Bertia can't notice it?

I wonder why she can't envision a happy future in which I can walk together with her?

Does she really think that I'm such a disappointing man to the extent that I can't do anything to change the bad world that she depicted?

Or could it possibly be... that all the affections I felt from her were just illusions, and the truth was that she didn't want to find happiness with me?

These worthless questions spun around and around inside my head.

I felt very bewildered at myself being surprisingly unable to keep my logical reasoning, to the extent that the tips of my fingers turned cold.

I could somehow keep the smile on my face, but my cheek was so stiff that I couldn't move it at all.

It was as if there were one or two screws that were taken from inside of my head and disappeared somewhere else.

"Cecil-sama, I'm giving this to you."

On the surface, my expression remained unchanged as usual, but inside, I was shaken by indescribable emotions and thoughts. In front of me whose thoughts had frozen, Bertia held out a diary.

On top of the blue cover, there was a pattern of a fading golden ivy and a rose painting. This was indeed something she loved very much.

It's quite thick and gives off the feeling that it has been used for a long time. I received it as it was presented.

"This is?"

Although it was good to receive it, but when I considered how it would be for me to take a look at the content if it was truly a diary like it appeared, I asked her about it while lifting up the book lightly after I barely received it.

"It's my diary."

"Diary?"

As I expected when I looked at it, it was indeed a diary. Moreover, it was something that Bertia herself wrote.

It was truly just like Bertia for perfectly not betraying my expectations in this kind of situation.

However...

“Why would you give this diary to me, Tia?”

I don’t understand the meaning of her giving me her diary.

Speaking of diary, with the exception of a special thing such as exchanging diaries between friends, isn’t it usually be something that you wouldn’t want others to see?

“...There were various evil deeds I have done to various people around the heroine for several years written inside that diary.”

“...I see. And then?”

“Since Cecil-sama is a genius, I think that you would have enough evidence to bring me the [downfall] even without such a thing, but just in case, please keep a hold of it. It’s my own personal diary. I think that it would surely be useful when the time comes!”

Looking at Bertia who began to speak about the diary at such a high speed in only one breath, I unconsciously furrowed my brow.

Oh, I see. This is supposed to be the evidence that can be used in order to bring her [downfall].

Until just now, I thought that it wasn’t good to look at someone else’s diary, but that thought was now blown away.

“Hmm,” while muttering that with a cold voice, I flipped through the pages with sidelong glances.

[Day × Month ○, Cloudy.

Today, I bullied the new maid. During tea time, when she made me the tea, I said, “This is bad. I won’t drink something as bad as this,” and threw the cup to the floor, breaking it. Just in case the cup didn’t break when it was thrown, I used a teacup that already had a bit of a crack in it that I’d found prior to the incident. I felt at ease because I didn’t break a new one, it was killing two birds with one stone!! The moment I broke it, the new maid looked at me with teary eyes!! Satisfaction welled up in my chest.]

Aah, she was speaking of that time, huh?

If I'm not mistaken, from the report that my [envoy] gave me, she brought the cracked teacup and purposely broke it in front of everyone, but... The teacup that she broke originally was cracked by the new maid, and because it was too expensive, she couldn't speak up about it and so concealed the matter, wasn't it?

On top of Bertia knowing it, she brought the originally cracked teacup, used a believable excuse, and broke the cup on her own, laying the blame on her and covering up for the new maid... it was supposed to be that kind of a moving tale, though.

Incidentally, the new maid was deeply moved by how Bertia covered up for her and on top of admitting her own mistake, she also pledged her allegiance to Bertia while shedding tears.

[Day □ Month Δ, Sunny.

Today, I practiced the method of making and tasting tea in the class. I had been waiting for this day to come. This was the time where I could teach the severity of society to Baroness Heronia, who is trying to snatch away my precious, His Highness, from me!! Since I had heard beforehand from Lady Joanna that we were going to form pairs to assume the roles of making tea and tasting it before assessing one another's skill for this lesson, in order so that I could properly pass some sarcastic remarks, I had been studying a lot about the ways and mannerisms in making and tasting tea!! In order to be able to make first-class sarcastic remarks, I practiced by making lots of complaints about the tea the maids made for me. As a result of that practice, I managed to say lots of sarcastic remarks!! In the end, Heronia-sama was red in the face and got angry with teary eyes. I felt so refreshed!!]

Come to think of it, that kind of thing did happen, and I heard about it from Lady Silica.

It was about how Bertia volunteered to be a pair with Baroness Heronia, with whom no one wanted to pair up with, and how the teacher was exasperated at Baroness Heronia's messed up choice of tea leaves, the timing for adding in the tea leaves, the temperature of the hot water, the steaming time, and her general carelessness, and very politely asked Bertia, "Please teach her."

I also heard about how in the end, Baroness Heronia got angry and her face turned red at her mistakes being pointed out by Bertia, and blamed Bertia's extreme critiques as, "It's because you hate me..." in tears, and was glared at with frosty eyes by everyone else.

Afterwards, regarding the so-called [practice] with the maids, I heard that Bertia's [Short Course on How to Make Tea] became very popular among the maids?

My [envoy] also said that the popularity of Bertia, who guided the maids and freely demonstrated a skill she'd gone to great lengths to master herself, was considerably raised.

When I scanned through the pages roughly, almost all of her [evil deeds] seemed to be like that.

For argument's sake, even if she succeeded, it would only be considered as [a little bit mean], but since most were failures (though they succeeded in increasing her popularity), it can't be the proof of her [evil deeds].

If I were to submit this kind of thing as evidence, I would end up becoming a laughingstock instead.

...Well, if we were to speak of being Bertia-like, it was really something very much Bertia-like.

If it were the same as always, at this time, I would surely think of Bertia as [cute], [amusing], [very interesting], or [entertaining].

However, I wasn't thinking of it that way right now.

Even though her actions were amusing enough to me, the fact that she handed the trump card (or so she thought) in order to ensure the success of her [downfall] to me ruined it all.

"...Hey, Tia. Do you want to leave me that much?"

The cold voice dyed in gloom spilled out from somewhere within my subconscious.

Even though I understood that there was no way it could be true, I couldn't help asking.

I felt like a speck of black spot fell onto my heart, which normally didn't really have any color on it, for better or worse.

And it gradually spread.

Then, at the same time, I felt that my expression turned grim.

“Ce... cil... sama?”

Bertia stared at my face as if she was surprised.

Her upturned eyes looked nervous, and those big and beautiful eyes opened even wider.

In one corner of my head, the calm part of myself said, “Calm down.”

Even so, the other part of myself couldn’t be stopped.

“Tia said that my happiness would come by being tied to the heroine, but I wonder if that’s really true? By all means, I don’t think so... Because my current life is already sufficiently fun.”

“T, that is... but... I mean...”

Even if she seemed like she wanted to say something, in the end, Bertia didn’t say anything else.

The black spot inside of me spread even further.

“Truthfully, it’s just Tia wanting to leave me, right?”

I should have known that those words would hurt her, who couldn’t say anything, but the calm part of myself’s control was shaken off and the other part of myself ran recklessly.

“T, that’s not true!!”

Bertia, whose eyes were instantly filled with tears, shook her head with all her might.

“Your Highness...”

I heard Zeno’s warning voice behind me.

However, I only heard it and nothing registered in my mind. I felt that it was nothing but just a sound.

“Then, why are you trying to run away from me?”

“I’m not running away! It’s just, Cecil-sama is precious to me, so...”

“Hey, Tia. What’s my happiness?”

“...To be tied with the heroine!”

It was the first time that I felt hateful to death towards Bertia who decisively declared that.

“Why do you still believe that kind of ridiculous notion?”

“Because I know the fate that’s going to occur from now on.”

“Is that really fate?”

“That’s right... I mean, it’s supposed to be.”

At last, the beads of tears she couldn’t hold back anymore trailed over her cheeks.

The eyes of her maids, Kuro, and Zeno were pained.

However, I couldn’t yield here.

...That’s what I believed.

It’s not what I [thought]. Yes... it’s what I [believed].

I took a deep breath.

After slowly blinking my eyes once, I stared at Bertia.

Bertia stared back at me with her eyes wet with tears.

“Then, I will destroy that fate.”

“No, you absolutely can’t!! It’s going to be something that Cecil-sama will absolutely regret!”

“Unfortunately, there’s just about nothing I’ve regretted.”

“Why won’t you do as I have told you?! With that, you’re going to be happy, you know?!”

“If so, then why do you so obstinately refuse to tell me the reason why you want me to do so? If it’s like that, then I couldn’t make my judgment.”

“That is...”

I sent a cold gaze that I had never given her even once up til now to Bertia who had held back her words once more.

“Let’s end this conversation already. Tia, I’m going to choose the dress for you.”

“Cecil-sama!!”

“This is the [game] that you started. Ascertain with your own eyes what kind of conclusion it will reach, okay?”

“...”

“At any rate, the graduation ceremony is close by whether you like it or not. The end of this [game], too, okay?”

“...I’m begging you. Please, be happy...”

“Yeah, I will show you. That’s why... don’t run away, okay?”

I laughed.

It was the same smile as usual.

However, for some reason I felt like my heart was bleeding.

Chapter 12

Bertia 17 Years Old (2)

“Bertia, you look very beautiful. The dress that I gave you really matches you well.”

“T, thank you very much, Cecil-sama.”

On the day of the graduation party.

From what her maids told me, she seemed to be severely worried, but she eventually wore the dress I gifted her and attended the party.

Looking at Bertia who was dressed in the present I gave her, my heart was filled with a feeling of satisfaction.

As I reflexively smiled, Bertia also gave her smile, albeit awkwardly. However, there was a complicated feeling floating around somewhere in her expression.

Thinking that it wasn't a good idea to let Bertia choose, the dress that I chose and gifted for her was a navy blue and golden dress with the image of the moon floating in the night sky.

A deep blue silk fabric covering her mid-chest to waist perfectly emphasized the strong points of her figure.

The necklace that I gave her today was shining brightly on her bosom, but not to the extent that it looked unpleasant.

The deep blue silk cloth that was the same color as my eyes, which resembles the night, had the same golden embroidery as the deep crimson red jacket I'm wearing.

The portion of the fluffy and spread skirt was stacked up repeatedly with golden lace that had the same color as my hair on top of the same navy blue color cloth as the upper half part, and there were several parts covered by the same golden-colored small gems mounted on it.

The dress that concealed an adult's grace in its gorgeousness gave off just a bit of the adult-like feeling to Bertia's image, who was always hopping around energetically. Still, it suited her very well.

...Well, since it's a design that I devised to suit her, obviously it would suit her very well.

"U-uhm, Cecil-sama, today..."

"Ssh, be quiet. The entrance will soon begin. Just a while after the entrance, the student council members need to be on the stage of the party, so I might make you feel a bit lonely, but please wait together with Lady Silica and the others, okay?"

Her eyes quivered, and her slightly parted lips that seemed like she wanted to say something resembled cherries that I couldn't help but gently touch them with my fingertips.

Her eyes opened slightly wider as if she was surprised by my action, and I smiled at those eyes.

...I won't allow any denial, rebuttal, or objection, okay?

I don't want to listen to words saying that you are trying to keep some distance from me.

It's all right. Everything will surely turn out well.

Since I will surely destroy everything today, be it the future that would make you sad, or the future that would snatch away my enjoyment.

That's why, can you not shake me up with any more incomprehensible feelings?

...Because I feel like something unpleasant has begun to awaken inside of me.

Just in time, music began to be heard from within the hall.

No. To be more precise, I adjusted the timing so that I won't have to talk excessively with Bertia until this party ends.

"It's time for the entrance."

The student who acted as a host greeted the graduates and their partners who were led by us, the student council officers.

I held out my hand to Bertia as a signal. Despite her being perplexed, she still placed her small hand on top of mine.

“Cecil-sama...”

I faced forward to indicate that I considered our conversation over, and her palm grasped my hand tightly as she called out to me with her small voice, as if wanting me to face her.

My mind was actually flooded with how I wanted to ignore her, but sensing that her voice was filled with an imploring tone, I couldn't stand it and turned towards her.

If it was just anyone, I would be able to ignore them whether they cried, raised their voice in anger or smiled. But only her voice—I somehow couldn't leave it alone, and I felt like I must not ignore her at all.

After I turned my gaze, I tilted my head and asked her, “What's wrong?” She swallowed her saliva and gripped my palm harder as if she was readying herself, and then she opened her mouth.

“...Ce-Cecil-sama, w-what... do you think... about me?”

Her resilient eyes were staring at me as if she was trying to probe into my true feelings. I spontaneously widened my eyes at her words that she asked with her trembling voice.

By no means had I ever anticipated that I would be hearing those words at a time like this.

“Tia?”

When I tried to examine her expressions in order to confirm what kind of intentions she had in mind when she asked that question, her body slightly jumped as if she was frightened of something.

“...”

When I gazed at her amber eyes, there were tears slightly welling up.

Looking at her tightly pursed lips, I somehow felt like [I had to quickly answer her].

“I think that Tia is very adorable. You’re so adorable and...”

“Graduates, enter!!”

[You’re so adorable and my precious fiancée].

The voice announcing the entrance of the graduates resounded within the hall as if it interrupted my voice which wanted to tell her that.

At the same time, the huge door to the hall was loudly opened with a heavy sound.

...Time limit.

While those words floated in my mind, I put my lips near Bertia’s ears and told her, “I will tell you the rest later on,” and turned my face to the front.

Just before entering the assembly hall, I glanced at her for a peek at her expression, and... for some reason, she was looking my way with an empty and lonesome smile on her face.

I was desperately worried about that expression, but time didn’t wait for me and just like that, I didn’t have any other choice than to begin walking in silence.

As royalty and as the current Student Council President of Halm Academy, I have to be a model for the other students and need to behave myself confidently in public places.

Seeing that it is a duty imposed on me, no matter how much I care about Bertia, it’s not allowed for me to make her a priority.

Therefore, I regretted a bit that I cut off the time I was able to speak with Bertia before the entrance began for a reason like [I don’t want to talk about any unpleasant things].

The announcement of the party’s opening.

The congratulatory words from my father, the king, towards all the graduates.

My greetings as the representative of the graduates.

The medal conferment given as the commemoration of the graduation.

Due to my position as the president of the student council, I have to assume the role as the graduates' representative, paying attention to the whole condition of the assembly hall from the stage and issuing detailed instructions so that the party could advance safely.

From my peripheral, I always kept an eye on the figures of Bertia and Baroness Heronia, but since Bertia's friends were gathering together around her vicinity, it didn't seem like there would be any problems.

Baroness Heronia, who was wearing a yellow dress, was served by the men around her as usual.

Since it would also be troublesome if every male student surrounding her turned into an invalid, I requested through Bertia for Kuro to neutralize the light particles. Even though I had already made Zeno do it, people attracted to the lights still kept appearing.

These kinds of people were mostly hedonists who only wanted things for their own desires, so because they were drawn in by Baroness Heronia herself unrelated to the spirit's powers, I've just left some of them alone recently.

In relation to this matter, I paid attention to her spirit through Zeno, but it¹ didn't seem like it would stop.

Putting into consideration that she wasn't using that much of power towards the people who intentionally approached her, perhaps it understood that [she, who had to use force, is isolated], so it probably couldn't stop.

Whether it was a good or a bad thing was another story, but it wanted to protect her because it felt that she was important, surely... Right?

The graduation party approached its midway point, and regarding the program, the only thing remaining that had to be prepared was only the succession of student council positions.

Once this program is finished, as the Student Council President, once I begin the first

dance, everyone else will be able to enjoy themselves afterwards.

I think that would be the time when Baroness Heronia will begin her movements.

That's why, I think I'll inform everyone else of my intentions a little bit before that.

Thereupon, if her plan stops, that would be [excellent], but if that isn't the case, then... there will be yet another troublesome thing for us.

Although the possibility of her saying rude things to Bertia couldn't be ruled out, Bertia was originally prepared for that kind of situation.

Rather than settling everything without having her see anything and telling her that [everything is fine], I'm sure that she would be more satisfied if she could make sure of everything by herself.

...Even if, for example, she could get hurt from that.

If something is supposed to occur but time passes with nothing actually happening, one would be filled with anxiety about, "When will it happen?"

It would be better to settle everything decisively for our sake from now on.

When I turned my gaze towards my father and Marquis Noches, my father was slightly astonished and showed his strained laugh, while Marquis Noches sullenly pouted.

I have talked about the speech and conduct of Baroness Heronia up to this point and my plan after this to these two people.

Of course, I didn't tell them everything, but no matter what, I need to have their permission on what I'm going to do after this, so I roughly informed them of my plans and received their permission.

On top of that, I asked them to keep silent because [I want to surprise Lady Bertia].

Marquis Noches showed his dissatisfaction, but I somehow managed to persuade him.

As for my father... he didn't really complain about anything in particular, but he nodded while looking at me with the kind of gaze that seemed to resign himself in some respects.

“In this place, we will be transferring the authority of the student council to the new generation’s student council!!”

I received the flower bouquet from Kulgan, who would be the next Student Council President through my nomination, and faced forward and made the declaration so all students would be able to hear me.

Although it was customary for the declaration of the succession of student council positions to be held at the graduation party, the transfer of control was already completed beforehand. The tasks related to the graduation party were done by the members of the new generation’s student council, so it was only a declaration without any particular changes happening.

It was only a declaration simply made for the sake of [distinction].

The sound of hands clapping reverberated in the hall.

I faintly smile while listening to the applause and slowly looked around the hall.

Then, I turned my gaze towards Bertia at the very end.

Because Bertia was also looking at me, our eyes met properly.

Her lips were tightly closed.

Her eyes appeared to be slightly glaring, and I wonder if it was so she wouldn’t cry. In addition, she had a bitter smile on her face.

I endured it and kept my gaze firmly on hers, while waiting for the clapping to stop.

One by one, the number of the applauding people started to decrease, and the sound dwindled.

And then, at the end, silence descended once again.

Feeling that Bertia’s face stiffened even further from tension, I once again turned my gaze towards the whole venue.

“There is another declaration that I want to tell everyone here.”

I put more power in my diaphragm so that my voice would resound throughout the whole venue.

Going along with the flow of the graduation party, the students and the guardians who weren't aware of the circumstances all tilted their heads while wondering what was going to happen.

Baroness Heronia's figure was reflected from the corner of my eyes, and I completely ignored her sparkling eyes and broad smile.

“Lady Bertia Ibil Noches, will you please come to the front?”

When I turned my gaze to Bertia again, she gulped her saliva down.

The other students who followed my line of sight made way for Bertia.

Bertia put her hand on her bosom and after taking a deep breath once, she straightened her posture and showed a resolute expression, walking straight to where I was.

...It was really Bertia-like to be able to be befuddled at this timing with how [It seems like she's about to fall from stepping on the hem of her dress].

I covered my mouth with one of my hands to prevent myself from laughing, and I put on a serious face.

“Your Highness, Ce-ce-ce-cecil. Bertia Ibil Noches has come forward.”

...

Bertia, you're way too nervous.

Even if you tried to put on perfect lady-like manners to behave like a first-class villainess, it would be meaningless if you stuttered and faltered with your words like that.

The atmosphere, which had tensed up from my unforeseen actions, loosened all at once.

Properly speaking, I should be furrowing my brows, but when one looked at Bertia whose face turned red with her teary eyes despite frantically trying so hard to behave herself resolutely, everyone would surely feel like wanting to watch over her with warm eyes, right?

There seemed to be some people who didn't think so, but the great majority of people in this assembly hall were turning their favorable looks towards her.

"Your Highness, Ce-cecil?"

Because I was too focused on observing Bertia's condition and the hall's status, Bertia lightly called out to me as I hadn't spoken.

Bertia was looking at me with her upturned eyes and docile expression that revealed her feelings such as, "Still not yet? Still not yet?! If you're going to do it, then do it without dragging on!" or "Now, come at me with a bang!"

She was extremely adorable with how she shivered just like some small animal.

Even though I don't have a preference of getting delighted for scaring others, I feel like a new inclination is going to awaken unintentionally.

...Zeno, I know that you're watching me with cold eyes while leaning against the wall, okay?

It's okay. Nothing like that will happen... eh? "Have you finally noticed your inclination¹, Master?" you said?

...You seem like you don't understand your master that well yet.

It can't be helped, I will make some time to have a [conversation] with you later on, slowly. I hope you will prepare yourself... I'll be looking forward to it.

"Your Highness, Cecil~"

After speaking with Zeno with our gazes, Bertia called out to me once again with her small voice that sounded like she was about to cry.

Sorry, sorry. It's not like I'm particularly ignoring you, okay?

I'll apologize, so can you not make that kind of expression that seems like you're about to cry?

Well then, let's keep the jest to this amount. It's about time I earnestly face you, who is so fired up.

This is one of the critical moments of my life that can counted on just the fingers of two hands.

For some reason, I feel strangely nervous.

"Lady Bertia Ibil Noches. You have committed a great crime."

"W-what are you talking about? I haven't committed even a single crime!!"

Bertia, I'm begging you, can you stop jumping the gun and cutting in before I've finished speaking?

Moreover, I wonder if it's because she's flustered, but her line was so awfully monotone.

Since Bertia's reaction is interesting, I instinctively wanted to continue observing her reaction as it was, but in that case, this conversation wouldn't advance.

Besides, this is also a critical moment for me, so I want to properly settle it.

While regretting it a bit, I touched her adorably chirping lips with my fingertips and urged her to keep silent for a short while.

She blinked several times with her blank expression, but she closed her mouth as soon as she guessed my intention.

"No. You have committed such a great crime... It's the crime of being born two years behind me."

The vibration under my fingers told me that Bertia reflexively muttered, "Eh?!" as a response.

As if not understanding the meaning of it, she tilted her head with a confused expression as I smiled profoundly at her.

The slight bewilderment also spread among the students in the assembly hall.

Even if I don't feel like seeing it, but surely Baroness Heronia was making the same expression as her reaction, right?

Since the situation didn't turn out like she'd guessed before.

Feeling satisfied with the situation, I retrieved a small, rectangular, velvet box from my breast pocket.

With just that, a high-pitched cheer arose even though there were only a few female students with good intuition.

However, it seemed like the main character, Bertia, couldn't comprehend what was going on, as she lowered her brows and gave a bewildered expression.

I knelt down on one knee and opened the box in front of her.

"Because you were born two years late, I have to wait two more years for your graduation, and also be separated from and can't live with you in this time. This is a very grave crime. That's why, to make up for it, two years later, right after your graduation, I will have to cancel our current engagement and have you become my wife, okay?... This is the proof of that promise."

"What?! Eh?! Why, this?! Eh?! Eeeh?! Y-your Highness, the downfall..."

"Now, give me your hand. Look, there's no need to be shy."

I grabbed Bertia's left hand as she was looking around at her surroundings, all flustered without any comprehension of the meaning behind my words. While she was still unable to grasp the unexpected flow of events, and I put the ring on her ring finger quickly.

She seemed to be so confused that she didn't even notice that the ring was already on her finger, let alone the meaning behind the ring, but I deliberately didn't mind it.

From the very beginning, I'd planned to take advantage of the confusion and push my way through.

If I could make it with this, then that'd be great. If it didn't work... or if a hindrance

appears, then I'd have to take measures against that next.

"The d-downfall is... I have to receive the downfall... Downfall..."

I tightly grasped her left hand as she continued to mutter meaninglessly about, [the downfall, the downfall] with her teary eyes, and the two of us faced forward.

...I've told her that I would bring about her [downfall] at the very end, and I've said it more than enough times already, but is carrying it out like this not good enough?

For one, since she wished for a downfall at this graduation party, I had things prepared in advance so I could deliver the downfall, but... leaving aside the place, had Baroness Heronia behaved herself, I'd planned to inconspicuously deal with her later on instead of deliberately aggravating this celebratory situation.

"We've passed our precious school days together, and I declare to all of you, who have come to watch over us here: Two years later, after waiting for her graduation, we will become a married couple, and we will show you that we can build a better country than it currently is, as the crown prince and the crown princess!!"

I declared with an imposing tone that resounded throughout the whole venue, as if I was making my dignity as royalty apparent.

The surroundings fell silent for an instant, as if they were lost in my voice that resounded through the whole venue.

And then, the next moment, all of the students in the assembly hall broke into smiles. There was the sound of everyone taking a breath, and soon they brought their hands together in applause, and at the moment when the atmosphere turned to the one of a [Come and clap your hands]...

"Objection!!"

At last, Baroness Heronia finally made her move.

Leaving her male student followers behind at her spot, she raised her hand and walked forward.

...Ah, just now, did she take a glance behind her? From the looks of her dissatisfied expression, it wasn't that she intentionally left her male followers behind, but that she

thought they'd follow behind her? Instead, she was left alone after the male students got cold feet and remained on the spot?

"...What do you mean by your objection?"

I tilted my head and smiled at Baroness Heronia who was standing right in front of us as she scowled at Bertia who was trembling next to me with an uneasy expression.

In a sense, I feel like I'm going to receive the most upfront answer in the past 6 years from her.

Naturally, there would be no favorable sentiment at all, as I faced her with the feeling of, "Finally, you came. Then, I will confront you."

"Your Highness, you've been deceived by that woman—by Bertia-sama!!"

When Baroness Heronia pointed out her index finger at her, Bertia's shoulders jumped greatly in her surprise as a response.

I reflexively wrinkled my eyebrows at that scene.

Truly, Baroness Heronia really has no manners at all.

Even if she tried to correct herself, it was very problematic how she, as a mere baroness, dared to address a marquess whose social status was higher than herself as [that woman].

Moreover, she also pointed at Bertia resolutely and put on an expression as if to say that she was satisfied, which was totally absurd for a noble lady to do.

Not to mention Marquis Noches and my father, even the students and the parents of the graduates present were all frowning in displeasure.

Among them, there were some women who hid their faces with folding fans while knitting their brows and bluntly displayed their contempt.

"Your Highness, Bertia-sama isn't worthy of becoming Your Highness' wife, much less to be the future queen. That person² has been cruelly tormenting many other people including me up until now. Discriminating others based on their social status, abusing me in front of great number of students. Yesterday, she pushed me off the stairs."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and reflexively sighed at Baroness Heronia who looked up at me as if she was appealing to me.

“I haven’t received any report on Lady Bertia doing such unjust things. Because of her status as my fiancée, she’s in a state where she’s constantly under the public eye all day. Logically speaking, it’s impossible for her to move stealthily. Incidentally, in the period of time when there are comparatively fewer eyes on her starting from yesterday evening, she was spending time together with me, and after the dinner, I sent her off to her room as she wasn’t feeling well. Thereafter, she was still in her room when the get-well flowers were delivered. When I informed the housemaster and asked sincerely to look after her, the housemaster seemed worried and frequently checked in on Bertia’s condition. From what she told me, Lady Bertia hadn’t taken a single step out of her room and seemed to be resting.”

“T-that, she asked someone else to...”

“If she had gone and asked someone else to do it, we don’t know who she could have asked, right? We will investigate that matter, so could you tell us who carried out the deeds in her stead? Since it’s something concerning Bertia’s honor, I will thoroughly investigate it and carry out appropriate punishment.”

“I-I still don’t know who it is...”

“Then it won’t get us anywhere. How will you explain your accusation of her bullying others? Where’s the evidence?”

“There were other people who suffered the same treatment as me! Everyone, now’s your chance!!”

...

Baroness Heronia’s gaze darted around her surroundings and extended both of her arms as she said, “Now!!” as if she was requesting for her comrades to follow her, but the assembly hall was completely silent with no reaction from anyone.

“There seems to be no one, though?”

“There’s no way that’s true! Everyone has always talked to me about a lot of things.

Now, everyone, there's no need for you to restrain yourself! Why don't we use this opportunity to let His Highness hear about the bitterness you have tasted so far? His Highness will surely listen to each and every story, so..."

...

She turned her gaze towards the assembly hall and appealed with her utmost effort, but nobody stepped forward.

That's a given.

If one were to assist her here in censuring the woman who'd be married to the crown prince two years later, it would have a great impact on their own position from here on.

Unless there's something greatly wrong, nobody would be willing to cooperate in such a thing, and because it's Bertia we're talking about, she wouldn't have done anything that could make her be hated to such an extent.

Several people individually turned their sight towards Baroness Heronia, and since there were some noble women who averted their eyes suddenly as if they were being uneasy, Baroness Heronia thought that those women would surely cooperate with her, but the reality was disappointing.

Judging from the situation, it was likely that they were fellow noble ladies involved in idle talk discussing about their complaints towards Bertia or that they were only accompanying Baroness Heronia's idle complaints, something along those lines.

However, they are not foolish enough to waste their own future just because of [commonplace chatter].

That's why, no matter how much Baroness Heronia requested, there won't be any of her so-called comrades to show up.

"W-why?! Everyone, you had to experience such bitter situations every time..."

Baroness Heronia's sight loitered around as she was bewildered, trying to find someone who was willing to help her. But, as a matter of course, no matter how long she waited, that kind of person would never appear.

“Ojou-san, then there was no [objection] coming from you at all... would it be all right to consider it like that?”

I gently pulled Bertia closer to me by the waist as she was standing next to me while muttering with her small voice, “A, a, d-downfall,” as she was still in the midst of her confusion. Then, I dropped my lips to her head, tilted my head and showed my smile which contained the meaning of, “Just give it up.”

“N-no, not yet!! I was thinking to present this report that was made inside my circle, but...”

She quietly crouched down and put her hand in her own dress’ skirt to take out an envelope which was quite thick.

...Baroness Heronia, the inside of your skirt isn’t a proper place to put something, okay?

Even though the lady’s dresses don’t have any place to store things away, but to put something in that kind of place, then turning over your skirt in front of other people to take things out of there, there is no conduct more shameful.

Look, the people around us also got surprised twice now, see?

“Your Highness, please take a look at this...”

I was troubled on whether I should receive it or not the instant I looked at the envelope presented to me.

Naturally, my reason for being troubled was, [Now, what would others think if I were to touch something that was just taken out from under her skirt.]

If it was something that was taken out from the skirts of my own lover or fiancée is one thing, but in any case one would be against touching something that was retrieved from a complete stranger’s skirt.

Well, even if I were to receive it, I wouldn’t go down the stage or to call Baroness Heronia up to personally receive it.

After staring at the thing presented to me while thinking that we’d get nowhere like this, my gaze incidentally landed on Zeno and I issued instructions to him.

Perhaps he had already predicted that things would end up like this, as before I even noticed, Zeno had already moved to my side from the wall, where the servants were waiting. He quickly took the envelope from Baroness Heronia's hand and presented the stack of papers inside the envelope to me.

"...I see."

When I flipped through the stack of papers and scanned its content, just as I expected, it was the written report of a thorough investigation on Marquis Noches.

Since I have received intel beforehand about how Baroness Heronia hired someone to investigate Marquis Noches, it wasn't something particularly surprising.

"And then?"

Despite being flustered, perhaps since she was worried about the content of the stack of papers that Baroness Heronia submitted, Bertia peered at the report that I held in my hands as she gulped a little, "Hii!"

Looking at how her complexion worsened even further, I removed the stack of papers from within her field of vision and gave instructions to Zeno so he could bring the report to my father.

Then, Bertia silently hung her head down and began to mutter, "As I thought, the compelling force...". In order to reassure her, I brushed her hair and softly whispered to her ear, "It's all right."

She has always wanted things to turn out this way.

However, as expected, to part with something that she had until now, even if she had expected it, it's still scary, right?

Bertia who was within my arms tried her best to behave herself resolutely to the end, but she was slightly shivering as she clung to and grasped my clothes tightly.

...for her to be this frightened, how pitiful.

So I thought.

However, at the same time that I sensed how she actually didn't want this kind of

future, I felt a little bit pleased.

I wonder, since when had my personality degenerated like this?

“That’s what I have investigated independently. As you can see, it is the proof of Marquis Noches’ crime!! For the daughter of a criminal to be Your Highness’ wife... to be the future queen, it can’t be tolerated!!”

“Fu~n, then you want to punish Marquis Noches and break off my engagement with Lady Bertia?”

At the edge of my vision, I saw how my father and Marquis Noches narrowed their eyes as they scanned the stack of papers they received from Zeno.

There was ridicule in my father’s eyes and anger in Marquis Noches’, but since they had positions where they’d ran the country for many years, their expressions didn’t change.

In contrast to that, many students, parents, and teachers who were present in the assembly hall seemed to be unable to conceal their bewilderment at the prosecution towards one of the country’s authorities.

Everyone’s sight was directed towards Bertia and me, my father and Marquis Noches, and then Baroness Heronia.

“Hey, you. I think that the document just now was certainly well-examined and could serve as evidence of undeniable crime.”

I smiled and caressed Bertia’s head gently as if I was trying to console her as I announced that, and a triumphal smile floated on Baroness Heronia’s face.

The moment I saw it, something within myself experienced a sudden drop in temperature, reaching below the freezing point.

Perhaps Bertia who was next to me noticed my change, as her body and face stiffened while she stared fixedly at my face with a fearful expression.

I circled my arm around her waist as she tried to take a step backward in fear and told her with a small voice so that she wouldn’t run away me, “I’m not mad at you.” However, her stiffened body didn’t relax at all.

“...However, this is not the evidence of Marquis Noches’ crime at all. Instead, this is the proof of crimes done by Viscount Conservatier, Earl Conmorno, and Baron Sagil, right?”

In reaction to my statement, Earl Conmorno and Baron Sagil who were present in this assembly hall as guardians, and then their daughters and sons leaped up in surprise.

Simultaneously, the people near them moved away in a fluster, as if they were afraid of being involved as well.

By the time they noticed, their surroundings neatly formed a circle with nobody standing near them.

Father, who was overlooking this situation, made an indiscreet signal with his eyes and they were soon restrained by the knights who were present in this assembly hall as security, so that they couldn’t escape.

“That’s right. It’s the evidence of their crimes, and also... there’s evidence of their connections to Marquis Noches submitted.”

Baroness Heronia turned her provocative gaze towards Bertia and Marquis Noches.

Bertia gazed at Marquis Noches and Baroness Heronia alternately with an expression that seemed like she was about to cry. Meanwhile, Marquis Noches smiled and turned his cold gaze towards Baroness Heronia.

He still hadn’t uttered anything to her, but that wasn’t because he can’t refute anything, it was none other than because he wanted to leave the matter to me.

His gaze that occasionally fell onto me contained hints that urged me like this, “Your Highness, my beloved daughter looks so pitiful, so please end this farce immediately.”

“Hey, isn’t it too much to declare a person as a criminal just because he has some connection to criminals?”

“That is... However, Kulgan-sama surely knows of Marquis Noches’ crimes!! After all, he has always been tormented by Marquis Noches who was his relative.”

Baroness Heronia hesitated for a moment, but then she stared at Kulgan, who was near me, as if trying to say, “Now is the time, go and say your resentment for years!!”

as she put her power into her gaze and nodded.

The surrounding gazes were directed to Kulgan, and Kulgan, who was suddenly brought into the matter, furrowed his brows until deep wrinkles were carved.

“...I have never uttered any single word to you about that, and I have never thought of it at all. My relationship with Marquis Noches is quite satisfactory, though?”

Towards Kulgan, who said it straight out indifferently, Baroness Heronia’s eyes widened.

“I-it can’t be!! You have always talked to me about various things...”

“I have always ignored the discomfort I experienced when you talked about your speculations of Marquis Noches of your own accord, but I don’t recall ever having affirmed it even once. Of course, I also don’t recall telling you about Marquis Noches’ crimes. In the first place, I have been helping Marquis Noches with his work, but in regards to Marquis’ crimes, I wasn’t aware of anything like that, so there’s no way I could tell you about it.”

Towards Kulgan’s complete denial, Baroness Heronia’s complexion changed.

“Don’t lie!! You should have been tormented by Marquis Noches for many years!!”

“I’m telling you, there is no such thing. Please stop all of this at once.”

Kulgan declared that bluntly with an expression that revealed his discomfort and as there was no need for him to say anything more, he averted his gaze away from Baroness Heronia.

...As expected, did she misunderstand everything?

I watched at the [scenario] I’d created unfolding before me without feeling any deep emotion.

Baroness Heronia was similar to Bertia.

Therefore, because there is a story that follows the [scenario] from the so-called

[otome game], there was a tendency for them to proceed in a way convenient to them under that assumption.

If you deny it entirely, they'd question if the premise has already been broken or not, but if you let the misunderstanding continue without denying it, it's highly likely that the story would continue without them noticing that the premise has already failed.

It's unexpectedly difficult to realize on your own that you have the wrong assumption about something.

That's why, I previously told Kulgan to not confirm or deny anything regarding Marquis Noches' crime.

It resulted in this situation.

Precisely because they had this assumption, if this assumption was destroyed, their unshakeable reality wouldn't be anything but a misconception.

Her field of vision was extremely narrowed because she was swept along by the easily understood depiction of the future that is the [otome game scenario]. As a result, she wasn't able to notice a thing until she made a decisive mistake.

The last chance that was given to her was completely crushed by her very own hands.

...It was very unfortunate, wasn't it?

"Aah, that's right. Regarding Earl Conmorno, Baron Sagil, Viscount Conservatier, and while I'm at it, Earl Uradil, whose name hasn't been mentioned up until now, both I and His Majesty the King are already aware of their crimes and connections to Marquis Noches. We received an intel about their suspicious movements. We asked for Marquis Noches and Kulgan's cooperation to infiltrate them and investigate. In other words, Marquis Noches isn't a criminal, he only feigned association with these criminals in his investigation, which means that he was someone who was tasked to arrest the criminals."

As everyone's gaze turned towards Marquis Noches as if asking, 'Is it true?', my father and I bowed our heads to confirm it.

"Since the investigation's finished and things have turned out this way, I'll have to arrest Earl Conmorno and Baron Sagil in this place. Also, in regards to Viscount

Conservatier and Earl Uradil... The knights have already headed towards them.”

...Despite saying that, actually, we’ve already finished securing Viscount Conservatier and Earl Uradil who weren’t present at the moment.

Since I had predicted this, I had already taken measures beforehand to ensure their arrests.

After all, there was a high possibility for them to run away if we didn’t speedily arrest them.

We can’t afford to make a mistake in such a matter.

“Well then, with this, your [objection] is dismissed as all just your own misunderstandings, but... what shall we do? You have tried to humiliate my fiancée and Marquis Noches in the presence of everyone like this, so it won’t be finished with just this, but... In this case, it would be necessary to talk it out as fellow noble families, but first, you should cool your head a bit.”

Baroness Heronia was astonished at my words, and the guard knight nearby seized her arm and stood her up from her previously seated position.

Although he seemed to be supporting her at first, his hands were using a lot of force and it’d be correct to say that he seized her in a way so that she wouldn’t be able to escape.

“...This is weird.”

Baroness Heronia murmured those words as she sat down again in resistance to the knight who was trying to pull her arm and lead her to exit from the room.

“Why can’t you understand? I’m the heroine, and yet...”

Baroness Heronia, who had been looking down, raised her head and suddenly glared at me and Bertia.

“Why wasn’t I chosen?! Didn’t I act the way you wished for?! Even today, I’m wearing a yellow dress!! Didn’t I choose it for you?! Yet I’m still treated like this?!”

The knight hurriedly tried to subdue Baroness Heronia who was heading towards us

like a demon shouting words whose meaning I didn't understand.

Watching her who acted violently even further, 2 other knights quickly came over.

"What a weird thing to say. I don't remember ever saying that I want to choose you, and I've never thought so, either."

"What?! Even though you're the android prince!! You, if you hadn't been chosen by me, then you would just become an intelligent doll without a heart, you know?!"

"...S-stop."

In response to Baroness Heronia who began to curse at me, Bertia tried to stop her by shaking her head with an expression that seemed like she was about to cry.

"I'm your [fated girl], right? You would immediately ascertain it if we kiss. After all, I am the heroine. The mark of the [fated girl] will rise to the surface of this body. Hey, Your Highness, you understand, don't you? If you don't obtain me, from now on, you're going to experience everything just like what you've experienced until now, a colorless world and boring days. Then, finally when you aren't unable to bear with that boredom... you're going to fall into ruin."

Although Baroness Heronia was seized by several knights, she still scowled at me with her burning eyes, desperately uttering her arguments.

However, I didn't understand the meaning of the words that she said.

She talked as if I knew about the [fated girl], but I do not know of such a thing.

I also have never heard about how a mark would rise to the surface with a kiss.

I turned my gaze towards my father, thinking that he might happen to know something, but despite his complicated expressions, he shook his head to indicate that he didn't know anything about her words.

When my gaze fell to Bertia who was in my arms, tears had already fallen on her face which turned from pale to white as a sheet, trembling as she lightly shook her head and muttering, "No, no."

Even while she looked like she was about to collapse, she still desperately spread her

hands, trying to cover my ears to protect me from Baroness Heronia's verbal abuse.

I grasped her hands gently while telling her, "I'm all right."

At that time, I came to understand for the first time why she stubbornly didn't tell me anything concerning the [downfall].

She didn't want me to hear the numerous harsh words that Baroness Heronia uttered just now.

Because she thought that I would be deeply hurt by those words...

She is truly stupid.

So stupid and... really adorable.

"You have to have me, or it would all be useless!! Because I am here, you will be able to get your heart for the first time. If I'm not there, you won't be able to think of the people as humans, and would remain as the heartless you!! If I'm there, you'll be able to shine as the finest crown prince for the first time!! That woman, it's foolish to think that she'd be able to help you get your heart, she can't even attract your interest. After all, she's nothing but a third-rate villainess. That's why, stop these guys immediately and take my hand!!"

"...What are you doing? Just hurry and get her down."

I turned my cold gaze at her as she was ranting and raving around, and commanded the people, who were pressing her down, with a low voice that seemed to crawl along the ground.

I didn't really understand the meaning of the words that Baroness Heronia said, but it was certainly something that didn't give me a pleasant feeling upon hearing them.

I felt like there was a sensitive part somewhere deep inside my heart that I hadn't realized was there before, and it was now rudely clawed at by those words.

If not for Bertia who tried so hard to cover my ears while being pale-faced, I wouldn't have been able to keep my composure by this point.

"No! Stop it!! I'm His Highness the Crown Prince's [fated girl]!! A special existence that

can't be replaced!! Understood? If you don't take my hand right now, you will definitely regret it. That's why... No! Stop!! Let me go!!"

The two knights dragged along Baroness Heronia who continued to shout even further.

Her hair had been disheveled and her face was in a mess due to her tears, yet I only looked at her indifferently while hugging Bertia.

At that time...

Gashaaaan!!

With a loud sound, the stained glass skylight which was right above our heads suddenly broke.

"Your Highness!!"

"Fushaaaaa!!"

I quickly covered Bertia's head to protect her from the raining glass shards.

Amidst the rising screams from the surroundings, Kuro and Zeno quickly moved.

Kuro raised a barrier around us while Zeno blew away the falling glass shards with his wind magic towards a direction where there were no people.

After checking the situation from the edge of my vision, I relaxed my arms and looked around to confirm the situation around our circumference. Then, I noticed that there was a ball of light that was flying overhead in our direction with great momentum.

As I narrowed my eyes to look at the dazzling object, I came to see that the object flying at such high speed was actually Baroness Heronia's bird—the light spirit.

"Shaaaa!!"

In no time, Kuro moved in front of us as she snarled at the light spirit that obviously held malicious intent towards us, trying to intimidate it as she strengthened the barrier's power to protect us.

The barrier which originally only had a thin membrane became thicker and it started to be clad in black lightning.

Nevertheless, the ball of light accelerated its speed even further instead of slowing down.

All of Kuro's fur was standing on end.

Zeno put up a defense to keep Kuro's unleashed powers from affecting the surroundings.

Seeing the knights who quickly ran towards us in order to protect us from the mysterious ball of light, I immediately gestured at them to stop.

They might not be able to see it, but right now, there was Kuro's barrier around us.

If they carelessly approached it, they might be at risk.

Bachi, bachi, bachi!!

Jarring noises could be heard as Kuro's barrier and the ball of light made contact.

Unable to move forward, the light spirit hurled its body at the barrier and still unable to advance, countless wounds accumulated on its body.

"...Pi-chan?"

Baroness Heronia stopped shouting and murmured dumbfoundedly as if she was surprised that her partner had suddenly appeared.

"Pii... Pii..."

The light spirit tried to chirp as it wanted to respond to its master even as it was gasping. As if it was mustering its last strength, the light spirit unwrapped its camouflage and shifted its body to a mass of light, heading towards us while strengthening its power.

Bachii.

"Kyaann!"

For an instant, a small white spark ran through Kuro's hands who was trying to maintain the barrier.

Aiming for the instant when Kuro reflexively withdrew her hand, the mass of light turned into a very thin beam and pushed its way through the barrier.

"Tia!!"

The spirit, on the verge of burning up its life, was finally about to reach us.

Even when I used Zeno's power that was inside of me to defend, I also embraced Bertia within my arms and used my own body as a shield.

"Ce-Cecil-sama!!"

Bertia's cry resounded within the assembly hall.

Close to my ear, I could hear the snap of the chain of the earring that Bertia gave me.¹

Pachii.

A faint pain to the degree of approximately a shock of static ran through my back.

It was the light spirit's last torch of life.

The moment I felt like the injury shouldn't have any power left to harm me, everything before my eyes was dyed white.

"Cecil-samaaaaaa!!"

I could hear Bertia's sorrowful scream close to my ear, but without being able to do anything, I lost consciousness.

Chapter 13

Bertia 17 Years Old (3)

“Where is this...?”

When I regained my consciousness, I was in a pure white space.

“...Is this something like my consciousness’ space that’s been influenced by the light spirit?”

I briefly checked over my body, but there weren’t any particular abnormalities.

Well, since I can’t really check my actual body in reality, I can’t definitively say that [I’m all right], though.

“Now then, I wonder what’s the deal with this?”

Thanks to Zeno’s power and the earring that Bertia gave me, for the time being, I don’t feel that things have gotten particularly troublesome.

In order to break through Kuro’s barrier, the light spirit had exhausted its power to the utmost limit. With the spirit’s remaining strength, it should be impossible to maintain this space for a long period of time and to continue imprisoning me like this.

At most, it would last around 10 to 20 minutes, I think?

“It’s unlikely that I wouldn’t be able to get out if I had thoughts of doing so, but rather than trying to recklessly force my way out and risk suffering the after-effects to my unconsciousness, it’d be better for me to wait until the light spirit uses up all of its strength, I guess?”

Considering the remaining quantity of the light spirit’s power, it shouldn’t be able to make any direct attacks on me, while I’m protected by Kuro and Zeno’s powers.

On the contrary, if I were to try to leave this place forcefully, I would have to attack and inflict damage to this space in some way in order to make an exit.

In that case, there's the likelihood that I might end up attacking too excessively, causing this space to be destroyed or twisted away from its desired shape.

If I have to take such a risk, it'd be better to wait on and not rampage recklessly.

"Though I hope that the spirit will use up all of its strength before Bertia begins to act rashly again."

I made a bitter smile upon recalling Bertia's cry that I heard just before I lost consciousness.

Now then, just right at the moment when I began to think about how I should pass the time here until the time-out...

The white space before my eyes began to shine brightly.

"How dazzling..."

I held my hand over my face and shut my eyes in order to avoid the light.

However, that light disappeared in no time.

Feeling that the light faded away from the sensation that passed through my eyelids, I slowly opened my eyes.

Laid out there was a familiar scenery that was completely different from the pure white world just now.

"The audience room... is it?"

A room inside the royal palace that I've gone in and out of many times over to attend on my father's work.

However, when I took a closer look, the ornaments placed and the curtains hanging on the windows were subtly different from usual.

Even so, they were not [unfamiliar things], but [nostalgic things].

These are...

“I-it’s a pleasure to meet you for the first time. I am the eldest daughter of Douglas Ibil Noches, the current head of the Noches Marquis family. My name is Bertia Ibil Noches.”

While I was trying to search back into my memories as I gazed around the surroundings, suddenly I heard the childish and charming voice of a child right in front of me.

As if being guided by that voice, my gaze fell to the place where I was standing, which was right in front of the throne.

Several steps away, there was the figure of a girl kneeling alongside with Prime Minister Marquis Noches—it was Bertia.

She was approximately 8 years old.

Her appearance was exactly the same as when I first met her... In other words, she was still in her plump snowman mode as she nervously stared at the floor.

This scene was entirely the same as the time when I was brought to meet Bertia.

...However, for some reason, Bertia’s reaction and expression didn’t match with what I remembered from my memories.

At that time, she should have turned her sparkling gaze at me who was standing next to my father, then introducing herself with a full smile.

I still vividly remember even now that I reflexively let a wry smile leak out towards her unabashed friendliness.

To put it bluntly, the attitude of the girl in front of me right now is more like the attitude of a [normal] noble lady, the proper reaction.

At around her age, most of the noble children should have mastered the skills to read the situation and to pay attention to their etiquette.

That’s why, when even adults would be nervous upon meeting the king and the crown prince in this audience room, it was normal for a child to be overwhelmed by that kind of atmosphere, became scared stiff and awkwardly gave their greetings in a frantic attempt to stay in accordance with the etiquette.

Being full of expressions and displaying simple-minded friendliness while facing this kind of situation, like how Bertia acted during our first meeting, is considered [odd].

But on the contrary, for me, no matter what, I felt that it was [odd] to see this Bertia who wasn't [odd].

...

The moment I unintentionally frowned at Bertia who wasn't acting like herself, I felt a sense of discomfort in my chest.

And the sensation that my fingertips turned slightly colder.

"What is this, this-..."

The moment I put my hand right on top of my heart and wondered at the strange sensation that I couldn't comprehend, my surroundings were wrapped in light once more.

After closing my eyes tightly, when I opened my eyes again, I was in the royal palace's garden this time.

It was the garden where Bertia confided in me about the [otome game].

"*Could it be?*" I thought while looking around my surroundings, and as expected, there were my younger self and Bertia sitting in chairs across from each other, drinking tea.

Looking at that scene, the words that Bertia declared to me at the start in this garden suddenly came to mind: "Your Highness Cecil!! I am a villainess!! My role is to tear at your relationship with the heroine who you'll meet after entering Halm Academy, and have my engagement called off at the end while receiving my downfall!!"

However, the younger versions of the two of us in front of me at present, were...

"I'm glad to have someone like Lady Bertia as my fiancée."

"T-thank you very much. I'll do my best to become a woman worthy of Your Highness."

I smiled my usual smile and Bertia bashfully smiled back.

Yes. It's ordinary.

At a place that's not a bit strange, an ordinary conversation.

But... No, is that exactly why?

It's extremely boring.

This is not the Bertia I know.

The one who was there was an [ordinary] noble lady who was a bit plump.

Actually, the younger version of me was facing Bertia with a smile, yet he didn't seem to be having any fun.

It was an expression that looked like I was wearing a mask.

Since it's myself, I can understand it very well.

The me over there had not the slightest bit of interest in her.

No concern or favor, or delight from the encounter or enjoyment of being together, no disgust, anger or sadness or any other negative emotions either; there didn't exist a single thing there.

There was absolutely nothing.

Suuu... ¹

The [discomfort] appeared once more in my chest as I viewed the [bland conversation] unfolding in front of my eyes with no emotion.

The [discomfort] this time was more distinct than the previous one.

From my chest... from my fingertips... The [warmth] that should have been there was fading away.

Then, like it was accompanying that feeling, I felt the expressions gradually slipping off my face.

It was a very unpleasant sensation.

It was such a detestable feeling like something precious was forcefully being snatched away, and I realized that I'd uncharacteristically clenched my fists tightly.

Gigigi... ²

My curled fingers all but wouldn't budge.

When I checked for the reason, I reflexively wrinkled my brows upon seeing my hand.

...My hands had turned into the unmarred arms of a bisque doll before I noticed.

[You, if you hadn't been chosen by me, then you would just become an intelligent doll without a heart, you know?!]

The words that Baroness Heronia threw at me not too long ago flashed through my mind.

Then, I turned my gaze once more at my younger self who was smiling without emotion as he talked with Bertia.

...It's the same.

Suddenly, I thought of that.

The younger me in front of myself right now was just like a doll with a smile on its face.

There was not a single human-like emotion carrying the same warmth that I have now.

That was [me].

Therefore, I could tell.

In those days, I was an [intelligent doll without a heart] just like what Baroness Heronia said.

I was merely an existence without a single interest, merely performing the duties given to me indifferently, and expressing emotions befitting of the situation that

people were normally looking for.

There was no like or dislike.

Not even good or bad, fun or sadness or even anger... Just a living doll that didn't have any of them.

That was what I was like at the time.

But that's precisely why I have one thing that I've been wishing for so strongly.

I've been wishing for an [existence that could captivate my interest], an [existence that could draw out feelings from me such as... feeling that something is precious].

"That is not [my] Bertia..."

Feeling that the [warmth] called [emotion] that had been collected inside of me little by little ever since meeting Bertia being forcefully snatched away, feeling that I was changing back into that prior "doll" version of myself, I felt a chill running through my spine.

[I hate it], [It's scary].

I shivered as I felt the unpleasant feelings surging forward within my chest in one go.

I understood that what was happening here wasn't real.

This place is a counterfeit created by the light spirit—and along with the other [me], I experienced the things happening in this world. The [me] that was created in this world was a mere instrument in which my consciousness was inserted to, but the real [me] that possess thoughts in the real world should still exist, right? ³, and the real body that's probably unconscious in the real world.]

Perhaps, the light spirit's influence can only affect the fake [me] and the instrument [me] within that place.

It shouldn't be able to influence the consciousness of my [true] self that's connected to the real world.

At most, it's something like a dream being shown by the light spirit.

...I understood that.

Despite understanding it, as the instrument changed, it felt like there was an illusion that made me feel as if [my] own feelings also changed.

That is a very mysterious, unpleasant, and dangerous sensation.

“I wonder if it’s better for me to get out of here earlier even if I have to do it forcibly, more or less? No, but, I also want to avoid the possibility that this sensation could influence my real self’s consciousness if I were to act thoughtlessly...”

Staring at my arms gradually turning into a doll’s, I pondered.

The light spirit should only be capable of fabricating a dream like this to confuse me.

Since I know that much, as long as I can securely keep a hold on my sense of self, it shouldn’t be able to that great an effect on me.

That’s why, the best choice in this situation really is to [wait for the light spirit to perish on its own], so I think.

But... it is so unpleasant, after all.

The moment I frowned at the scene in front of me, a gust of wind suddenly blew towards me.

When I slowly opened my eyes which I had closed in the spur of the moment, the scene before me had changed once more.

In front of Bertia who was crying because her mother just passed away due to an illness, I was wearing a sad look and spoke words of comfort while keeping a certain distance from her.

Next to her, there was the figure of Marquis Noches who was standing there without any expression, his eyes tainted with despair and pent-up anger.

It was the future that was supposed to have happened.

Over there was the future that Bertia and I changed together.

Perhaps because the Bertia in front of me was following the different path from the Bertia that I know, her personality, her speech and conduct, even her appearance—they all didn't match the ones from my memories.

Looking at her like this, even if I felt that she was [pitiful], my feelings didn't move any more than that.

However, witnessing the scene that differed hugely from my reality, I fully realized that [the Bertia in front of me and the Bertia I know didn't overlap each other anymore], and I felt something similar to frustration.

At that moment, more warmth escaped from my chest, and from my hands to my shoulders as well as my feet changed to that of a doll's.

The scene in front of me changed so rapidly that it didn't even give me any leeway to worry over [what should I do?].

Marquis Noches became ruthless to other people as if he had changed into a completely different person.

He only poured his affection towards Bertia who was his wife's memento, and Bertia gradually changed into a selfish and arrogant noble woman.

If things didn't go the way she wanted, her anger would awaken and she would destroy everything she could lay her hands on.

She would take offense at her servants' speech and conduct, and act violently.

As she snuggled up to me with her coaxing voice, forcibly pressing her plump body close, and at the same time completely keeping in check all other women who got closer to me.

Such scenes kept being projected before my eyes.

And each time, the warmth that was supposed to be inside of me was snatched away, and my body steadily changed into that of a doll's.

Eventually, the projected scene changed and the grown-up Bertia finally entered Halm

Academy.

By then, my body had more or less been changed into that of a doll's.

No matter what I saw anymore, I wouldn't feel anything.

...As I was having the delusion that they won't move, I felt a cruel sense of loss, agony, and sadness.

No.

This is not me.

My warmth... the [emotion] that I was able to gain... don't you dare snatch [Bertia] away from me.

Inside of the [instrument] me who had changed into a doll, the [real] me, who was locked up, clamoured insignificantly.

The [instrument] that was hiding my surrounding said that [it's weird to have that kind of emotion], trying to deny the emotion and will that the [real] me possessed.

It's agonizing. I feel nauseated.

However, with this doll's body, I couldn't even breathe, let alone cry.

Even if I had to destroy everything, I thought to break this instrument and leave this unpleasant world.

However, the calm part of myself whispered.

"If you leave this place with this chaotic state of mind, what are you going to do if your real self's state of mind is affected?"

"If things turn out like that, in the worst case, the [emotion] that you've finally able to gain... you might lose [Bertia] for real, you know?"

The moment I thought of that, I felt that the imaginary horror that this space gave couldn't be compared with the horror of that possibility.

That possibility is the one thing I absolutely could not accept.

“Your Highness Cecil!!”

The moment I thought that the scene changed once more as my surroundings were wrapped up in the light for the umpteenth time, the sweet voice of a woman barged into my ears.

A bright and a pure smile.

I felt the illusion that everything became brighter with her just being there.

Like light incessantly rained down only around her.

I was fascinated by it.

The warmth began to return in my chest once more.

The fingers that had reached out on their own began to return to those of a human's from that of the doll's.

However...

[This is wrong.]

[It's fake.]

The real me who was inside the doll complained with an unconcealed anger.

The one who was at the tip of my extended fingers was Baroness Heronia.

She isn't my precious fiancée.

My fiancée is...

[...Then, wouldn't it be fine to just change your fiancée?]

Wrong.

Wrong.

That's not it.

Despite knowing what the right answer was, there was a part of me that wanted to nod at the whispers made in my own voice.

This is a nightmare.

As long as the light spirit has used up all of its strength, I'd wake up from this dream and my rational thought would return.

However, this nightmare itself is way too unpleasant that it makes me want to cling to this immediate comfort in front of me.

Although that [comfort] is the opponent that forced this kind of asceticism onto me.

I bit my lips as I stared at Baroness Heronia who was smiling at me, and at myself gradually beginning to show a real human's expression instead of than the fake smiles I'd made.

Despite feeling that my body, which had changed temporarily into a doll's, returned to that of a human's, I got irritated by the process even when I should be feeling relieved.

Contradiction. Contradiction. Contradiction.

I couldn't maintain the consistency of the emotions inside of me.

At any rate, everything will cease to exist so long as I wake up from this dream, so why don't I try to yield myself to the fake emotions that the light spirit is displaying without resisting?

It should be easier that way.

Such a thought suddenly crossed my mind.

After I thought about it, I decided that things would be easier that way without a doubt.

Also, if things will return as the way they were before in just a few minutes, then there's no meaning in trying to resist it so hard.

It would just be a pointless effort.

The feeling of wanting to oppose and the feeling of wanting to stop resisting are clashing.

“I... like Your Highness Cecil. Even if I antagonize Bertia-sama, I can't change how I feel.”

It's a scene that resembled the eve of Halm Academy's graduation ceremony.

Baroness Heronia sweetly murmured that to me after I'd felt anger at Bertia's cruel actions towards Baroness Heronia and had decided to discard Bertia.

Inside my chest which had never felt any kind of emotion apart from [interest] or a faint [favoring], something ardent was accumulating inside... such was my delusion.

[Is this the emotion commonly known as love? For the one who gave me this kind of feeling... there's already no way I can let her go.]

I embraced Baroness Heronia closely and gave a dark smile that managed to send shivers down even my own spine.

The one there was no longer the “doll” me.

Ardent emotions were filling my chest.

I closed my eyes gently as I felt a returning joy from the warmth that I managed to feel inside myself.

Just a little longer, let's yield to this comfortable sensation.

The moment I thought so...

“Your Highness Cecil!! Why?! Why is that woman standing next to you?!!”

I heard Bertia's sorrowful cry.

When I reflexively opened my eyes, it was a scene of condemnation.

I'd seen all of Bertia's violent actions up to this point inside this world that the light

spirit had created.

That's why, the scene of this world's Bertia being condemned in front of so many students and their guardians like this was supposed to be a catharsis.

However, even though her appearance was somewhat different, she had features that greatly resembled my Bertia, and when she sorrowfully screamed with the exact same voice as my Bertia, my heart began to ache.

And then, the moment I saw the teardrops that spilled over and fell from those amber eyes, that image overlapped with the tears that the real Bertia showed to me.

The feeling of wanting to temporarily yield myself to the fake solace from Baroness Heronia quickly disappeared all at once.

Though it wasn't reality and even if it was merely for just a short time, I truly hated acting in accordance to the light spirit's expectations and yielding myself to the one who hurt my Bertia.

I can't accept that, no matter what kind of agony doing so would bring me.

The moment I thought so, something other than the warmth that was forcefully given to me began to boil inside my chest.

It was certainly the [emotion] that I possessed myself.

**Crack*...*

I heard the cracking of something like a thin shell.

When I looked around at my surroundings, there were cracks here and there around the space I was in.

"Has it reached its limit at last...?"

Before I noticed, the scene around me turned into something like a flat surface, and the scenery was torn off just like a wall crumbling down.

A collapsing world.

However, only one part, the area around Baroness Heronia alone was slightly glittering with light as each crack was restored as if something was resisting.

“Why don’t you give up already? No matter what kind of illusion you show me, my heart won’t change... I will never consider your master no matter what.”

I faced the empty space and declared.

Even though I couldn’t see its figure, it was supposed to be there based on the presence I felt.

Sure enough, the light spirit clearly heard my words and erased the surrounding scenery like it had given up on preserving that space, returning it back to a pure white world.

However, unlike the first time, there was a small boy around 5 years old standing there by himself.

It seemed like it was difficult to be take form even in the world that he created himself as his figure was transparent, and seemed to be on the verge of disappearing at any time.

“...Why? Why can’t it be Heronia? There’s supposed to be that kind of future waiting for you, you know?”

I smiled bitterly at his figure who was trying to frantically appeal to me as he rubbed his dripping tears with the back of his hand.

“‘Why,’ you ask? Perhaps I can only say that it’s because I have gone towards a completely different future.”

Certainly, just like what the light spirit said, there was certainly the possibility that such a future existed.

Because of how closely it resembled the world of the [otome game] that Bertia had told me about, I could somehow or another even believe that the possibility was quite high.

However, I have already walked down to the path of another future.

I can only say that it's impossible for me to turn back to the former path.

Besides, when I was shown the possibility of another future just now, I was convinced once again.

Rather than the original future decided for me, I was many times more pleased with the other future in which Bertia and I could walk down together.

Under such circumstances, why must I correct my track towards the path leading towards the original future shown here?

I do not feel any necessity in doing so, and even if one were to insist on it, I'd want to resist it with all of my power.

Because I've been having a lot of fun in my current life with her—with Bertia.

"If it's now... you can still change things, can't you? Hey, I'm begging you. Choose Heronia! At this rate, Heronia will only be sad and feel bitter."

His actual age should be far older than me, but looking at his youthful appearance as he was appealing with his teary eyes brought a little pain to my chest... no, I don't feel any pain.

I didn't really feel compassion towards the enemy who hurt my Bertia and who tried to snatch Bertia away from me.

It might be considered coldhearted to others, but these are my true feelings.

Though I've gradually come to understand that thing called emotion and there've been a couple of [exceptions], nevertheless, my true nature is still to be lacking in emotion.

The illusion that the light spirit created allowed me to come to this realization.

As well as the importance and loveliness of the unique existence who let me experience such [exceptions]...

"I'm sorry, but it's impossible. After all, I dislike her. Originally, she was a [stranger that I have no interest in], but you two have repeatedly done foolish things in order to

snatch Bertia away from me, haven't you? This is the situation that you two have caused on your own."

I answered with a smile.

The light spirit opened his originally large eyes even wider at my words.

"Why? Why?! I mean, Heronia said so. That you are Heronia's destined person. And that's why it's a matter of course that you'd come to like her. Even in the scene that I showed earlier, although there were a few additions, but in the first place it was the prophesized future that I created based on Heronia's memories, you know? Even though Heronia was just doing her best to guide you onto the correct future!!"

The light spirit who couldn't accept the reality cried, "This is weird," as if he was throwing a tantrum.

He looks so foolish... and pitiful.

"No matter how hard you tried, I was quite pleased with Bertia by the time I met you, so it's very unlikely that things would change in the future. And that's only to begin with, but don't you think the direction of your endeavors couldn't be more mistaken? If you hurt someone in order to grant your own desires, you will definitely provoke someone's anger and hatred. Who do you think would like someone who's repeatedly speaks and acts selfishly when their wishes don't come true? I won't say anything about having to defeat the opponent for your own wishes. After all, it's a necessary thing to do in order to procure the one and only position. However, if you want to defeat someone, you don't do it by scorning your opponent, but you should work hard so that you can stand one step ahead of your opponent. Isn't that right?"

In order to grant her own wishes, Bertia also kept repeating her (useless) endeavors.

You could say that she and Baroness Heronia are a bit similar in that sense.

However, there is a big difference between her and Baroness Heronia.

Even while saying [I want to become a first-class villainess!], Bertia had never hurt her opponent in the literal meaning.

Even if she has ever tried to hurt her opponent, the result is—everything has ended up as a failure.

It could be said that it was all due to [luck] up until now, but I think that it was because subconsciously, she wanted to keep things safe without crossing the boundary line.

Though Bertia is aiming to become a [villainess], she isn't used to hurting people.

She is actually very against the notion of hurting people, and each time she tried to accomplish it, I knew that she herself was hurt in a place she didn't even realize.

Even so, she kept trying to accomplish it, and it was due to none other than her [kindness].

She is not a shrewd person in the least, so she can't really conceal her [kindness] that well.

That's why, I think that her [kindness] naturally reveals itself and attracts people.

She also has another great power.

It is her ability to put in great effort and polish herself in order to grant her own wishes.

Though she acts in a weird direction sometimes and it makes me amused, I think that it's a very indispensable power.

And neither I nor Baroness Heronia possess these powers.

...Yes, it's the power that even I do not possess.

"But, otherwise, Heronia won't become happy, right?"

"Isn't it wrong? It's because of you two that she can't become happy. On top of accepting the destiny that has differed, in order to be happy, as long as she works in order to be liked by the one she wants to be liked by, at least she wouldn't have to stand in that place of condemnation without any friend other than you by her side, would she? She wouldn't have been alone in a place surrounded by enemies."

"Then, what should I do?!"

The light spirit shouted.

Even while doing so, his body is steadily becoming transparent.

Heading towards the end... In that person's words, it's proof that the countdown to his death has begun.

"You trying to protect her from feeling sad was what made her actions becoming more impudent. If you truly care about her, on top of showing her the reality, you should just reprimand her at times and be her support nearby, wouldn't that be enough? If you do so, it might not manifest in the way she wished for, but I think that she would be able to obtain a certain degree of happiness... Well, it's already too late for that, so even though I'm quite sure of it, it's already impossible to confirm how things would have turned out in reality."

"No way, because... because..."

I looked down at the light spirit who sat down in shock at my words.

Though he may feel a deep regret, there's no more time left for him to start over.

"Speaking of something even more serious, if you disappear here from using up all of your power, she will really be all alone. If the things happening up until now become big, at the level of a baron house's power, they wouldn't be able to cover for her. If they were to cover for her poorly, the house would fall into ruin. Baron Inderon will undoubtedly forsake her. If you're not there, the friends that were gathered to her side by your power would also leave. And, you yourself won't be there by her side. It's a complete isolation."

"Heronia... Heronia..."

"This is the future of the path that you two chose to walk."

The light spirit had faded to the extent that even his silhouette couldn't be discerned clearly.

He fell prostrated on the floor as he was lamenting at his master's fate.

I can only look at that scene in silence.

If I were to say [Leave Baroness Heronia to me], he'd be able to die with a peace of mind, but I already have a partner that I have to cherish.

I can't protect someone who might hurt that partner of mine.

And by doing so, there's a high possibility that I myself might also hurt the very person that I have to cherish.

That's why, no matter how pitiful I think he is, I can only watch.

Seeing me just standing in silence, he should have realized that, as well.

After that, he disappeared a little.

When that happened, he stopped lamenting and raised his face.

He roughly wiped the sopping tears from his face and fixed me with a strong gaze.

"I-I'm aware that Heronia and I have caused troubles for you guys. That's why, I understand that it's wrong for me to be asking this of you, but... can you convey my message to Heronia?"

"If it's only that, then I don't mind. I dislike you two, but... because you two were here, there were things that I came to realize. I will listen to your last wish as my thanks."

"...Please tell Heronia, [Even if you can't see me, I will always be with you.] I can't do anything else other than that."

He desperately tried to smile even when he was in sorrow, and his smile was crooked because of it.

He probably also has many regrets for having to leave in this kind of circumstance.

In exchange for his life, Heronia's remaining hope of being tied together with me was also severed.

"Even if your figure couldn't be seen, you will be by Heronia's side. Is that your wish?"

"After all, even if spirits have used up all of their power and disappear, they will just return as a part of the world. I, my consciousness as an individual will disappear, but I will become one of the grains of light that illuminate the world, and I will be by her side. I want her to also think so. I want to tell her that she isn't alone, that she has a friend."

Looking at him who was nodding firmly with a gaze full of determination, I couldn't help but think [If only that kind of expression was made a little bit earlier, I wonder if something might have changed?]

“...Understood.”

I looked in his eyes and nodded back.

After he made a slightly relieved expression, his eyes slowly closed.

I can tell that the world of the light spirit that's imprisoning me is also going to disappear.

At the same time, the light spirit's life as a spirit is also disappearing.

His human figure returned to that of a simple light.

I'm sure that his consciousness has become thin enough to make it even more difficult for him to think.

“...It looked like it'd be bad for me to be waking up with this kind of ending, somehow.”

In front of the life that was gradually disappearing, this time, my heart was genuinely hurt a bit.

It is very unlikely for me to come to like them, but even so, there are certainly things that I managed to learn thanks to them.

Just like I'd told him earlier, it might not be so bad to lend a hand in order to reward them for it.

It was a very small hope to give.

I'm not going to cover up for Baroness Heronia.

After all, you ought to reap what you sow.

The rest is up to them.

“Zeno, lend me your strength.”

I put my hand to my chest as I call out to the spirit inside of me—to the connection that I have with Zeno.

If the collapse advances like this, then it should be possible for him to send me some power through the cracks.

“Well then, shall we go back post haste?”

While slightly smiling at the quick answer and power given, I gently stretched my hand in front of me.



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